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ICT SOLUTIONS IN POLISH LAW FIRMS

NARZĘDZIA INFORMACYJNO-KOMUNIKACYJNE WYKORZYSTYWANE W POLSKICH KANCELARIACH PRAWNYCH

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Summary: Functioning on the market without the use of ICT solutions is nowadays impossible. Information and communication technologies are part of the image of modern organizations as a tool supporting business processes and also enabling smooth communication both within the organization and with the environment. The aim of this article is to review typology of information and communication solutions that are used by a very specific group of organizational entities such as law firms. Due to the specificity of the entities whose functioning will be cited in the article, it was necessary for the authors of the article to adopt a broad perspective of the discussed solutions. Therefore, the article presents IT tools supporting the distribution of legal knowledge which benefits not only law firms but which is also accessible to all other business entities, as well as the directions and possibilities of ICT

solutions supporting the work of law firms are indicated. The research tools used by the authors include literature research, analysis of IT solutions available in the area of distribution of legal information sources, and many years of professional experience of the authors of the article.

Keywords: sources of legal information, legal regulations, legal information system, legal information technology.

Streszczenie: Funkcjonowanie na rynku bez wykorzystania rozwiązań ICT jest współcześnie niemożliwe. Technologie informacyjno-komunikacyjne wpisują się w obraz współczesnych organizacji jako narzędzie nie tylko wspomagające procesy biznesowe, ale również umożliwiające płynną komunikację zarówno wewnątrz organizacji. jak i z otoczeniem. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest dokonanie przeglądu rozwiązań informacyjno-komunikacyjnych, które wykorzystywane są przez bardzo specyficzną grupę podmiotów organizacyjnych, takich jak kancelarie adwokackie. Dlatego też w artykule, z jednej strony, zaprezentowane zostaną: narzędzia informatyczne wspomagające dystrybucję wiedzy prawniczej, z której korzystają nie tylko kancelarie, ale również dostęp mają wszystkie inne podmioty gospodarcze, z drugiej strony zaś – wskazane zostaną kierunki oraz możliwości rozwiązań ICT wspomagających pracę kancelarii. Jako narzędzia badawcze zastosowane przez autorów należy wskazać badania literaturowe, analizę rozwiązań informatycznych dostępnych w obszarze dystrybucji źródeł informacji prawnej, jak również wieloletnie doświadczenia zawodowe autorów artykułu.

Słowa kluczowe: źródła informacji prawnej, przepisy prawa, system informacji prawnej, informatyka prawnicza.

1. Introduction

Information technology is the basic tool supporting the operation of all conditions.

This is also the case with law firms, where the use of IT tools becomes particularly important due to the specificity of the work of these organizations. In order to develop their activities, law firms use information and communication solutions on three independent levels.

The first important area in the era of computerization and process virtualization is communication with customers and creating the image of the organization in virtual media. This takes place through their Internet pages on which there is information about the law firm, and it is also possible to publish, for those interested, information about the activities of the law office.

The second level – distinguishing this position, which is useful from electronic sources of legal information. In this area, the position is supported by legal information sources made available by public parties as well as consultations.

What distinguishes this group of entities is the use of electronic sources of legal information. In this area, it is important to use both sources of legal information provided by public parties as well as commercial suppliers.

The third – no less important for the effective functioning of law firms is supporting internal organizational processes, analogically to any other economic

entity. However, in this area there are few integrated IT solutions dedicated to this group of entities.

The aim of the article is to review and describe information and communication solutions supporting the functioning of the law firms in the three areas indicated above.

This forces the authors to adopt a very broad perspective of the problem due to the scope of the possibilities of supporting the functioning of law firms through information and communication technologies.

2. Three levels of supporting the activities of law firms

As indicated in the introduction, the activity of a law firm may be supported in three key areas of activity. Due to the specialized activity of this group and the specificity of its work, it is very important to have IT support, which is also available for employees as well as for its clients.

In general, we can indicate that ICT supporting the law firm can be created and increased to allow access to the integrated creation, buying and flow of information between the three main levels of technical data (Figure 1).

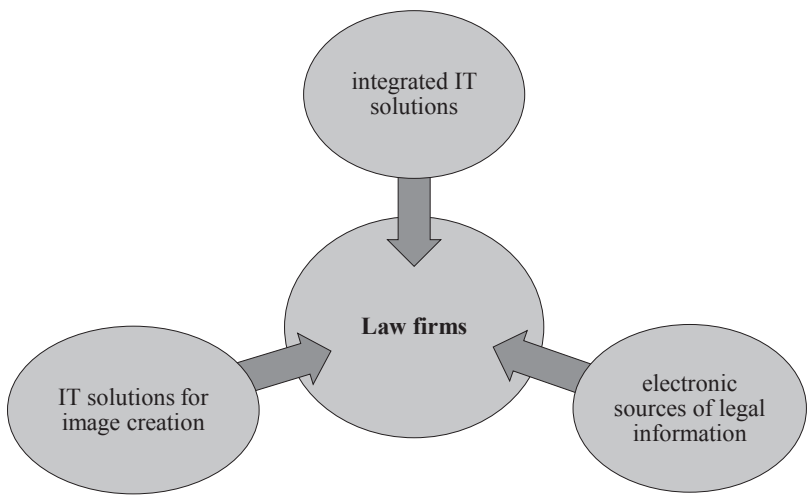

Fig. 1. ICT solutions supporting law firms

Source: own elaboration.

The use of ICT solutions in these three aspects should not only enable law firms to support all business processes that they implement, but should ensure full integration of information resources.

Contemporary business organizations, including law firms, in line with the volatility paradigm, in order to meet the requirements of a competitive environment,

should quickly respond to changes in the environment while taking care of the well-being of their own organization and clients [Brajer-Marczak 2017, p. 16].

Therefore, striving to acquire and implement IT solutions that enable securing all levels of the organization's functioning becomes for many entities a key determinant of its survival and organizational development.

In the following sections of the article, the available technological solutions will be briefly presented, enabling the creation of an integrated information system supporting the above-mentioned levels of the functioning of law offices.

3. Electronic sources of legal information

Technological progress, expressed, among others, in the development of Internet technologies, increased the availability of information at all levels of the organization's functioning. This is of particular importance in the area of informing society about the changing legal conditions concerning both natural persons and business entities. For all market participants, and in particular for business entities, properly structured legal information is crucial from the point of view of decision-making, which translates into the functioning of enterprises, state institutions, and individual natural persons [Patkowski 2013, p. 366]. Managing organizations means constantly dealing with complex legal problems. Therefore, more and more professional groups are trying to obtain legal information from generally available sources of legal information gathered in knowledge bases dedicated to this area.

Providing free access to legal information is one of the main tasks of law firms. On the one hand, this is crucial for the proper functioning of the law firm itself, and on the other hand, it is the basis for the provision of services to clients of appropriate quality.

Among the trends in the field of providing legal information, one should mention, the rapidly progressing digitization of legal information, the use of access to the Internet, and the growing variety of forms of providing legal information [Odlanicka-Poczobutt, Kulińska 2014, p. 104].

The development of Internet sources has meant that the first stage of searching for legal information that would enable solving business problems are free websites. Of course, clients of law firms are also free to use this source of information. This means that a stakeholder who wants to access legal information on websites often looks for materials on a topic and similar to the problem they want to solve [Wierczyński, Wiewiórowski 2007, p. 220].

Unfortunately, finding the required information is usually insufficient for this – the specificity and high degree of specialization of legal knowledge mean that the seeker is not able to legally assess the quality of the information found, and is often not able to interpret it properly.

Therefore, the main business task of law firms is to provide services consisting in the development of studies aimed at interpreting specific legal provisions that are unclear to their clients.

Two main sources of digital legal information resources can be specified for law firms:

1) websites,

2) electronic legal information systems.

There are many specialist websites on the Polish market that publish legal information resources. These pages can be divided according to the publisher of the content provided in them:

- official websites – run and maintained by many institutions of state administration (executive and judiciary),
- commercial websites – published by market entities implementing their business intentions in this way.

The most important benefit of both types of sites is that they are free of charge. What is important for recipients is their structure, substantive content and quality of functional solutions.

Entrepreneurs looking for legal information reach for commercial websites fastest. This is due to the care of commercial publishers for the appropriate positioning of their sites, and in this respect these sites have an advantage over official sites. The main difference comes down to the goal set by the publishers of official and commercial websites. Information on public entities' websites is a value in itself and their presentation is the primary goal of the website author. The legal information on the commercial website has a different character, as it is usually used to interest its addressee in other (paid) products of the commercial entity, and thus it is a means to achieve business goals.

Therefore, law firms primarily use websites offered by state institutions.

Examples of such publicly available databases of legal documents are:

- Internet System of Legal Acts (ISAP – available at http://isap.sejm.gov.pl/) – a modern version of the first database with legal information in Poland [Śwital 2015, p. 191; Petzel 2017].
- Central Database of Administrative Court Rulings (available at http://orzeczenia.nsa.gov.pl) - a collection of administrative court rulings [Śwital 2015].
- Tax Information System (available at http://sip.mf.gov.pl) – mainly a database for official letters from the authorities of the Ministry of Finance [Chomiak-Orsa, Krajewski 2018].

The second source of electronic legal information for law firms are electronic legal information systems.

While websites containing legal content are a place where employees of law firms usually look for the latest information on a specific field of law, electronic legal information systems support solving specific legal problems. From the perspective of the use of this digital solution by employees of law firms, it is very important that, apart from the collections of legal norms and constituting documents, they contain the interpretation of the law as well as interpretations. The content of an exemplary electronic legal information system is presented in Figure 2.

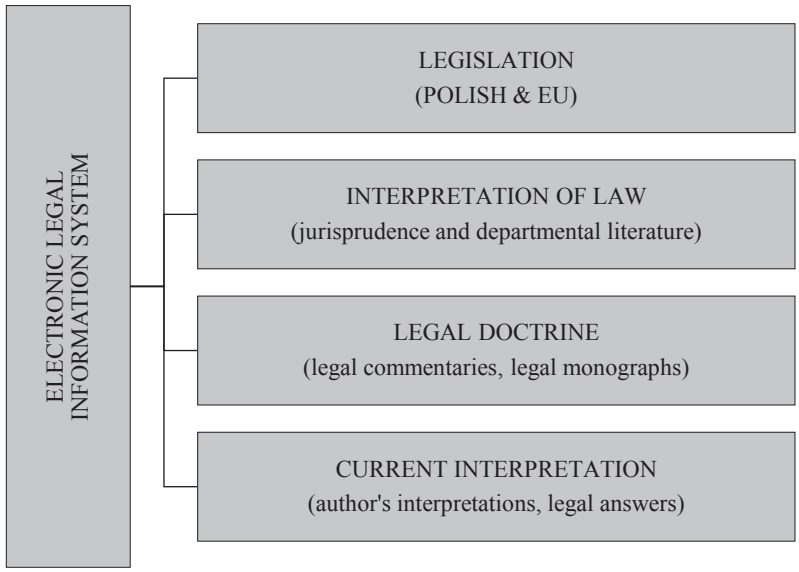

Fig. 2. Electronic legal information system

Source: own study based on [Chomiak-Orsa, Krajewski 2018].

Documents of legislation, interpretation and legal doctrine constitute the core and value of any legal information system used by law firms. Obviously, as indicated earlier in the article, clients of the law firm may also have access to these sources of information. Nevertheless, advice on the interpretation of regulations, legal practices as well as official procedures are the main core of the activity of law firms.

4. IT solutions for image creations

The second level of activity of law firms is the area of establishing relationships with clients.

Although the activity of the law firm is very specific, consisting primarily in the provision of knowledge services, nevertheless more and more law firms use online tools to advertise on a large scale, create an image and establish relationships with clients.

Most law firms have their own websites. In this respect, there are many solutions used by law firms. Unfortunately, many law firms have only informative websites. Such solutions allow only passive communication with a potential client by publishing information content such as: company headquarters, location, period of operation on the market, scope of services provided, or references.

In the case of using such a solution, the law firm adopts a passive attitude in looking for clients. If a client is looking for a law firm and accidentally finds

a website that interests him/her, there is a chance that he/she will also find a law firm. Nevertheless, this way of using information technologies to inform clients seems to be far from sufficient in the era of the development of internet marketing tools.

Another type of websites that are increasingly used by law firms are active websites containing contact forms and forms that allow to initially profile the client and arrange for him/her a specific visit date. This type of solution is a natural consequence of the development of passive websites, but it is also ineffective in acquiring new customers and creating relationships with them.

In recent years, attempts to use modern internet marketing tools by law firms can be observed more and more often. Naturally, not all internet marketing tools that are available in the area of supporting the creation of relationships with clients find reasonable application in the activities of law firms, but their use by this group of business entities can be observed more and more often.

Therefore, law firms, similarly to other organizations, most often use internet marketing tools such as:

- search engine optimization (SEO) – law firms, seeing the increasing importance of searching the Internet for information on the activities of companies, strive to make their pages visible on the first pages in browsers in search results;
- search engine marketing (SEM) – a combination of activities in the field of search engine optimization as well as paid advertising, which is a marketing procedure that ensures priority in the search results of potential customers;
- banner ads – used by larger law firms that advertise their activities on industry websites on the Internet;
- activity in social media – setting up company or professional profiles can be observed among an increasing number of law firms. These are both company accounts as well as activities carried out by individual lawyers who are the "face" of the company or its associates;
- word-of-mouth marketing – as an internet marketing tool, used only in law firms that already use other tools such as a social profile or running discussion groups. It enables the creation of recommendation lists from satisfied clients, who thus confirm the professionalism and quality of the services provided by the law firm;
- viral marketing – a type of word-of-mouth marketing used to spread certain ideas or social activities in which law firms participate. It is a tool that is primarily intended to build the image of the law firm as a business entity that not only works for financial benefits, but also engages in numerous 'pro publico bono' actions and projects;
- mailing – the main communication channel between law firms and their regular clients. It is definitely less frequently used in the area of looking for new clients, as the specificity of the law firm's activities does not justify the use of this internet marketing solution.

The above-mentioned internet marketing tools are not all the possible ICT tools that law firms can use in their activities. However, they are mentioned here because they are the main types of solutions that are slowly being implemented by law firms.

5. Integrated IT solutions

The last area of activity of law firms supported by information and communication solutions is the handling of internal business processes.

In this regard, law firms decide to use generally available IT solutions on the market.

Nevertheless, due to the narrow scope of services provided as well as the extended processes of individual customer service, the scope of documents produced is small.

This means that law firms do not report the wide range of needs related to the wide functional scope for the implemented or used IT system, therefore producers of integrated systems do not have dedicated offers of solutions for this group of clients.

Classic IT solutions offered on the market by many software producers include modules such as:

- invoicing,
- accounting and finance,
- reporting,
- settlements,
- warehouse and sales,
- personnel management,
- workflow,
- document circulation,
- managing contacts with customers.

Obviously, not all these modules are used in most law firms due to the small scope of the created documentation and the very narrow framework of business processes resulting from the specificity of the activity.

A very common tendency in the area of computerization of internal business processes of law firms is the use of office tools such as Excel to create e.g. accounting documentation and its settlement.

Observing the scope of ICT solutions used for the needs of law firms management, one can see the large gap in the potential offered by IT systems and in their use by these organizations.

Yet there are no systems that would support communication between these two partners by integrating internal processes with state administration entities.

6. Conclusion

The development of the activity of law firms in recent years has been very intensive. Therefore, supporting the activities of entities in this industry through information and communication technologies becomes the determinant of their further functioning and development.

The article indicates and presents three levels of operation of law firms and the scope of IT tools that can be used to support them.

The IT solutions in the area of supporting the distribution of legal information are very extensive. Legal information systems support the channels for the flow of information about the law. This undoubtedly has a positive impact on the legal awareness of the users of the legal information system, which may translate into the degree of compliance with the law. The level of the legal regulation of business, combined with the general shortcomings of the Polish legal system in the form of ambiguity and rapid changeability of legal provisions, bring a permanent need to verify the activities carried out from the point of view of their compliance with the law and adaptation to new legal requirements.

Legal changes affect many areas of activity of enterprises, moreover, current economic activity (business) also causes the risk of entering into legal disputes – be it with contractors or, for example, with public authorities. There are many positions in the structure of the company, the representatives of which function according to legal regulations. It seems that in the era of the Internet, globalization and the highest technologies accompanying running a business, the only rational source of legal information are electronic databases and websites. Thus, paper information carriers (in the form of magazines or various types of periodicals) should be considered obsolete and inadequate to the possibilities currently offered by electronic resources.

The situation is different in the area of creating the image of law firms through the use of internet marketing tools, as well as supporting internal business processes. In these areas of activity of law firms, much may still change in the coming years.

The authors' considerations result from their experience both in the area of managing a law firm and consulting in the field of computerization of business entities. As a result of the analysis of the situation discussed in the article, the authors plan to conduct research in the future to illustrate the state of use of internet marketing tools by law firms, and also to define the barriers.

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