

## Long-term investment puts IT at the business's heart

Keyhouse's legal practice software solutions have evolved to meet its customers' changing needs. **Barry McCall** reports

It may be a well-worn cliché, but change really is the only constant in modern business. And this is certainly the case in the legal profession. "We have seen enormous changes since we installed our first systems back in 1983," says Justin Phelan, managing director of Keyhouse, Ireland's largest developer and supplier of legal service software.

"At that stage it was the exception rather than the rule for basic packages such as word processing to be in use in legal practices. Now IT is at the very centre of many legal practices."

Phelan attributes the success and longevity of Keyhouse to its ability to respond to customers' changing needs and to the close relationships developed with those customers over the past 20 years and more. "Many of our customers have been with us since the very beginning, back in

1983," he adds. "We have grown together. We are constantly talking to our customers and listening to them. As a result we are continually upgrading our solutions in response to customer needs."

This responsiveness is facilitated by the Keyhouse strategy of developing its software solutions. "All of our software products are developed and supported by us in Ireland," says Keyhouse sales and marketing director Brian Sweeney. "We don't take solutions developed for other markets and try to apply them here. All of our products are specifically designed for the Irish legal sector."

"When a client comes to us looking for a solution we are able to work with them and design it around their needs and business objectives. As a consequence we are now the largest supplier to the legal profession in this country with more than 200 firms and public sector legal departments using our products."

This depth of experience has given Keyhouse a real hands-on understanding of what a legal practice needs, and how important successful implementation of IT solutions is to a practice.

"You often hear companies saying that their biggest asset is their customers," continues Sweeney.

"This is definitely the case with us. Our customers and our staff are our most important assets. Our customers play a very



**Mr Brian Sweeney, sales and marketing director, with Ms Martina Winters, sales executive at Keyhouse in Bray, Co Wicklow.**  
Photograph: Cyril Byrne

significant role in the development of our products.

"Our customers tell us about their changing needs and we respond to them. It might be a case of a customer telling us that they would like to be able to do a certain thing with the package or looking for a quicker or simpler way of doing something. We take

that on board, and look to incorporate it in the next upgrade."

Most importantly from the customers' point of view is that all upgrades are free, as part of their annual support licence fee.

"Once a legal practice buys a Keyhouse solution they have made an investment for the long term," says Justin Phelan. "We

are not in the business of selling boxed packages and walking away. We develop the software and provide the hardware.

"We offer a service right the way up from a single PC to full network installation and management. Information technology can be difficult to get right. It is a complex specialised area. Using

our considerable experience we maximise the benefits for our customers.

"Most of all, we work in partnership with our clients and take a common sense approach - we don't give our clients anything they don't want or need."

Brian Sweeney describes this partnership approach as almost

like being in a club. "In a club members work together for mutual benefit and all members have equal rights," he says. "That's very much the way we view our customers. All of our customers are equally important to us - it doesn't matter if it's a small practice with just one or two PCs or a large legal department operating a major network. When we make improvements to a product in response to customer needs all of our clients benefit equally."

This philosophy also applies to the Keyhouse support service. "Among the unique things about this company is the fact that we develop our own products and we focus solely on the legal sector," Sweeney notes. "When one of our customers telephones to look for support with a product they speak to a professional with in-depth knowledge of both the product and their business."

"Every member of our support team has a deep understanding of the needs of legal practices and law departments - in many cases this is every bit as important as expertise in the product."

Justin Phelan points out that the quality of this support service is particularly important in the legal sector. "Legal firms tend to focus on their core business - servicing clients," he says. "This is by no means unusual in business, but it does mean that most will not have a dedicated IT department or team and technology may not be viewed as some-

thing which is central to the business. As a consequence, they can be very reliant on the support service offered by an IT vendor. Our team here has a combined experience of almost a century in servicing our clients, and delivers a top-quality service."

This well of experience is also leveraged for the ongoing development of the Keyhouse suite of products: "We do not work in isolation from our clients," says Brian Sweeney.

"The feedback which comes through our support team enables us to continuously improve our products and ensure that they deliver real results for our clients. Technology is not an end in itself. Simply buying a software package and investing in hardware will not deliver results."

"The technology solution has to be designed and tailored to meet the specific needs and business objectives of the individual practice if it is to deliver real results. It also has to be viewed as a long-term investment, one that will grow and change with the practice. That's what we offer our clients - solutions specifically tailored to their needs which evolve to take into account any changes which may occur."

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