

Legal Aid Online - Surveys of Non and Partial Users

Background

Legal Aid Online (LAOL) allows solicitors to apply electronically for all types of legal aid for their clients, as well as submit accounts and supplementary information for some types of legal aid. It also allows the Scottish Legal Aid Board (SLAB) to respond to applications and other communications electronically. It gives solicitors a quick and easy method of making applications and sending their accounts, as well as quicker turnaround times for decisions and payments.

From 1 April 2011, the Board will no longer accept paper applications and all applications must be made online. This will enable solicitors to communicate more quickly with the Board, and vice versa. Accounts processes will be introduced in a phased approach in 2011. This will not impact on how applicants communicate with their solicitor, or the Board.

In 2008 the Board commissioned a survey to explore reasons for non / partial use of the system. Since then the scope and usage of LAOL has increased dramatically; however there are still solicitors' firms who do not use it. It was agreed that further survey work should take place to ensure the Board was aware of any outstanding issues and barriers solicitors and firms may have in preparing for the complete switchover to online submission for applications. Two waves of surveys were carried out, the first in 2010 engaged those solicitors who had not used the online system. The

second wave, carried out in 2011, engaged firms who were 'partial' users of the online system. This included both those who were using the online system only some of the time, and those who were using some features all the time and other features not at all.

Aims and objectives

The research aimed to:

- measure awareness of LAOL (including the intention to move to an online application process by April 2011);
- establish intention of moving to LAOL, amongst those not using it;
- explore barriers to using LAOL;
- explore office practices that might impact on use of LAOL (e.g. use of proprietary case management systems, use of law accountants, use of various technologies, and access to the Internet).

Methodology

The Board commissioned an independent company, George Street Research, to carry out and report on the surveys. The questionnaires for both surveys were designed by the Board's Research Unit, based on requirements from the LAOL Marketing Team and with input from George Street Research.

The LAOL Marketing Team provided contact details (firm / branch name and phone number) for both surveys. For the partial users survey this also included detail of the firms recent usage of the online system, since this was specifically asked about in the survey. Branches of the non-users were contacted, whilst partial users were contacted at firm level. Individual names were not provided since the way Legal Aid Online is managed within firms varies. In some firms the solicitor is the principal user, whilst in other firms this may be an administrator.

For those not using LAOL a telephone survey of branches of solicitors' firms was undertaken over a 3 week period in June 2010. 429 branches not using LAOL were selected and 328 people took part in the survey, with 168 contacts completing the survey in full. Interviewers were instructed to ask to speak to someone who could talk to them about their use of Legal Aid Online. Over half the completed surveys were with a Partner or Senior Partner (56%), and a further 24% were with a Solicitor. Other contacts included Office Managers and Administrators. (11%)

For those partially using LAOL a telephone survey took place over 3 weeks in Feb / March 2011. A total of 202 contacts (73%) were achieved from a sample of 276. Interviewers were told to ask to speak preferably to a Senior Partner, followed by a Solicitor or Office Manager. 72% of interviews were with a Senior Partner, 8% with a Solicitor and 19% with an Office Manager.

Summary of findings

Non-users

Awareness of the online system was very high; 93% knew they could use LAOL to apply for advice & assistance, civil or criminal legal aid.

79% were fully or partially aware of the planned move to online provision by April 2011. Since the survey the Board has undertaken further steps to increase awareness.

Three-quarters of those spoken to said they 'definitely' or 'probably' intended moving to LAOL.

The largest single reason for not using Legal Aid Online was that respondents had 'not got round to

it (yet)' (38%). Other reasons given by over 10% of respondents were; 'does not fit in with my style of work / office practices' (16%); 'not worth it for the amount of legal aid work we do' (16%); 'not enough time' (15%) and 'not good with computers' (13%).

For most of those spoken to information and communications technology provision was not a barrier to using LAOL. Training, either for themselves (39%) or for other staff (30%), emerged as the main types of support which respondents would like to see in order to assist them going online.

Partial users

Awareness of the move to a fully online system by April was high (97%), although 57% were not aware that accounts can still be submitted on paper after that date. 76% were aware that cases can be progressed online even if they began on paper. The majority of respondents felt their recorded use of LAOL (information provided by the Board) was about the same as they expected.

The biggest single reason given for LAOL not being used for all intimations or applications was that it is used for one type of work but not others (23%). 21% noted that they 'don't always have time to use it', and 18% that not all staff use it.

Many respondents reported that they are still getting used to the system, or are working towards doing everything online.

Awareness of support provided by the Board was good, although awareness of teach yourself or e-learning modules online (63%) was lower than for individual training visits (81%), or the online dedicated telephone helpline (83%).

The main benefit of using LAOL was identified, by 53%, as 'quicker to get decisions on applications'.

Next Steps

The Board has gained valuable 'user' perspective on the Legal Aid Online system. There was a good response to both surveys, showing that firms are able to engage with the online system. The proportion of Senior Partners and Partners taking part, particularly for the partial users survey, shows interest at a high level.

The findings of these surveys have been considered and are being used in a number of ways: to inform and further develop our Legal Aid Online marketing strategy; to inform the development of LAOL products and support services and to support individual firms in moving to and using LAOL. The LAOL Marketing Team are continuing to meet requests for training and support.

Further information

This research briefing is available on our website at:

http://www.slab.org.uk/about_us/research

If you would like further information about this research project please contact Jo Garrett, Research Unit, tel: 0131 240 2042 or email GarrettJo@slab.org.uk.

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