

Clients Not Ready to ‘Talk to a Robot,’ but Jackson Lewis Bets on Automating Compliance Tasks

Jackson Lewis’ workthruIT site serves as a digital tool suite for general counsel, HR and employers for workplace-related issues.

By Ian Lopez

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When trying to get ahead of the pack, Am Law firms tend to look to one another for benchmarks. A current line of demarcation for firms pursuing the “innovative” label has emerged in the in-house development of client-facing technologies. But what about the widely accepted quantifying factor of success, the billable hour?

From the vantage point of Jackson Lewis, the impact of client-facing technologies on the billable hour has yet to be determined, but while clients expect technology, they’re “just not plain ready yet to talk to a robot to make a decision,” said the firm’s digital officer, Victor Barkalov.

Jackson Lewis, however, is betting that clients will look toward technology to handle compliance. In its first step with client-facing technology, the firm announced on Tuesday the beta launch of its online tool suite for workplace laws and regulations, workthruIT. Designed with 16 tools for in-house counsel, human resources professionals and employers, the suite is available to select clients and allows them to obtain and research information around workplace decisions, then bring their findings to an attorney for advising.

The tools are slated to work with federal and state workplace laws and regulations, and available among them are checklists, databases and maps, calculators



digital tools

and what Jackson Lewis described in a statement as “sophisticated assessment tools.” Greg Alvarez, principal in Jackson Lewis’ Morristown, New Jersey, office, told Legaltech News that many of the tools designed by the firm “streamline the information gathering process, providing clients with the advice they need on a number of issues.”

In describing how the tools would fit into a workflow, Barkalov, who oversaw the data analytics team's development of the workthruIT suite, said to consider an employee leave request. In determining whether the employee is entitled to leave, a "junior HR person" at an organization can use the tool to work through an assessment, then send the information to a senior HR official for review, who would then send the information to the general counsel. From there, the GC would OK or reject the decision.

"Boom, the decision is made much more quickly than if we just started shoving paper around," he added.

Among law firm client technology offerings, workplace compliance is a popular area of focus. Firms like Bryan Cave, Bernstein Shur, Franczek Radelet and Littler Mendelson have all used the web for client-facing tools and educational initiatives. As Littler Mendelson chief knowledge officer Scott Rechtschaffen told LTN, "More and more clients want to access legal services online."

"Your clients and most big law firm clients are in-house, and for us HR. They're just like the rest of us: They get their news online; they interact with their files online," he added.

"Compliance is something that's on everybody's mind," Barkalov said. "I cannot tell you how many times we hear from national clients that operate in 30 or more states that it's just virtually impossible for them to keep track sometimes even of the simplest things."

Indeed, given their prevalence at the federal and state levels, workplace laws and regulations are known to be difficult for compliance. WorkthruIT's web page describes laws and regulations facing employers as "increasing" and "onerous." In California alone, nearly two-dozen cities and counties have their own minimum wage ordinances. As Carothers DiSante & Freudenberger managing partner Dan Forman wrote in *The Recorder*:

The local wage ordinances recently implemented by the city of Los Angeles are a good example of complexities and overlapping requirements. Effective, July 1, 2016, employers with 26 or more employees must pay employees who perform at least two hours of work within the geographic boundaries of the city in a week at least \$10.50 for each hour worked compared to the 2016 state minimum of \$10/hour. Incorporated cities in Los Angeles County, such as Beverly Hills or Culver City, may have (or will have) their own minimum wage requirements. Thus, an employer with locations in Los Angeles and Culver City is required to pay two equivalent employees a different minimum hourly rate.

"Everybody is a little scared spooked by the development, particularly nowadays, where a lot of localities and municipalities are passing various regulations and laws," Barkalov said. "At the end of the day, all [our clients] want is to sleep soundly at night, and I think our tools allow them to do that."

Alvarez said the firm is still deciding on pricing.

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