



Betting on the small guy

Mark Loosmore, from technology consultancy AT8 Group, disusses how large corporates and banks are being left standing by some smaller IFAs, who are firmly in the driving seat when it comes to using technology for distribution. This week: Birmingham-based Interface Financial Planning

In the current set of articles AT8 is writing for *Professional Adviser*, we have visited large and small distributors to understand how technology is being used in the field and at the office.

We expected to see the banks and large corporate organisations leading the way in the creative use of technology, but the reality is that it is often the small IFA that has the edge in implementing innovative solutions. Not held back by prolonged corporate procurement processes, or heavily bespoke legacy technology, we are seeing a number of the smaller IFAs being quick to seize on opportunities to use technology to improve their business.

Planning with Interface

There are few places that this has been better illustrated than during the visit we made this week to see Interface Financial Planning. Interface is the IFA business run by Alan Moran, based in Birmingham. It is a single adviser business, but don't let that lull you into a false impression of the nature of the business. Moran has a sharp intellect, combined with a charming manner that has led him to set up a very efficient business. His intellect is backed up with an impressive array of qualifications (QCA level 7 plus some) and a membership of Mensa. He has applied his personal facets to driving efficiencies to the heart of his business using technology. Some examples of this come in the form of voice dictation software that automates his meeting notes and in the way he has used his back-office systems and client website to enable him to virtually remove all paper from his business.

Before describing his use of technology further, it is worth noting that Interface is now a fee-only business. To achieve this Alan has to provide holistic financial planning and first-class service. Both of these fundamentals are supported by effective use of technology.

Telling Truth

His financial planning is driven by the Truth software. I have written much over the past months about Truth and don't

intend to repeat it here, other than to say it is used to provide effective planning for his clients, and Moran believes there to be no better package. He uses Truth in conjunction with Adviser Office from 1st - The Exchange, using the automated links between the two to avoid duplicate data entry, which is something we have supported and encouraged for many years and we believe should be an essential part of any IT infrastructure.

Compliance 'a pleasure'

Adviser Office (AO) is at the heart of his business, storing all client information and all contact records. Client documents, quotations, meeting notes are all stored in AO. Accordingly, the solution allows great CRM management capability and provides a clear compliance audit trail should it be needed. Indeed, Moran states compliance procedures are a "pleasure to perform", because all the data is available at the touch of a button. That's not something you hear every day.

Dragon talk

The way Interface stores information is worth discussing further. First, as mentioned, all meeting notes are dictated and transcribed by an automated system called Dragon Naturally Speaking, which speeds up the process of creating the meeting notes. Business cards are scanned in, with a specific card reader turning the data into electronic records with ease.

All documents received are also scanned, saved and then the paper copies destroyed. The movement to electronic records became a necessity, because Moran has a small home office. The documents are scanned, indexed and stored using Watermark Technologies.

AO is used to run the Attitude to Risk (ATR) questionnaire (using the embedded Towers-Perrin questionnaire). It also provides automated portfolio valuations and automated commission matching. All commissions are offset against fees, which is

done without manual intervention. Commission reconciliation is performed once a month for no more than 30 minutes.

Interface has not just used the technology in the back office. To become truly paperless, it has used the technology to provide a communication mechanism with their clients and prospects. It has a website from IFA Systems that provides not only a professional public image but a valuable interaction tool to any prospects. In the public section, it has a number of calculators and planners and can even allow quotes to be obtained via Weblines. The branding and imagery is maintained by Moran himself using the standard features within the IFA Systems package.

However, it is the private area that provides the real value and is the hub for all communications with the client. It delivers a secure email link to the client and access

to important documents. These documents include not only standard marketing literature but specific client documents, such as financial plans and suitability letters. The factfind is available for viewing and can be amended directly by the client (who is encouraged to do so) before any review meeting, or simply as there are changes in their circumstance. All such changes are notified automatically back to the Interface team. The Private section of the website also provides a 'window' on the portfolio held by the client and allows them to track its performance.

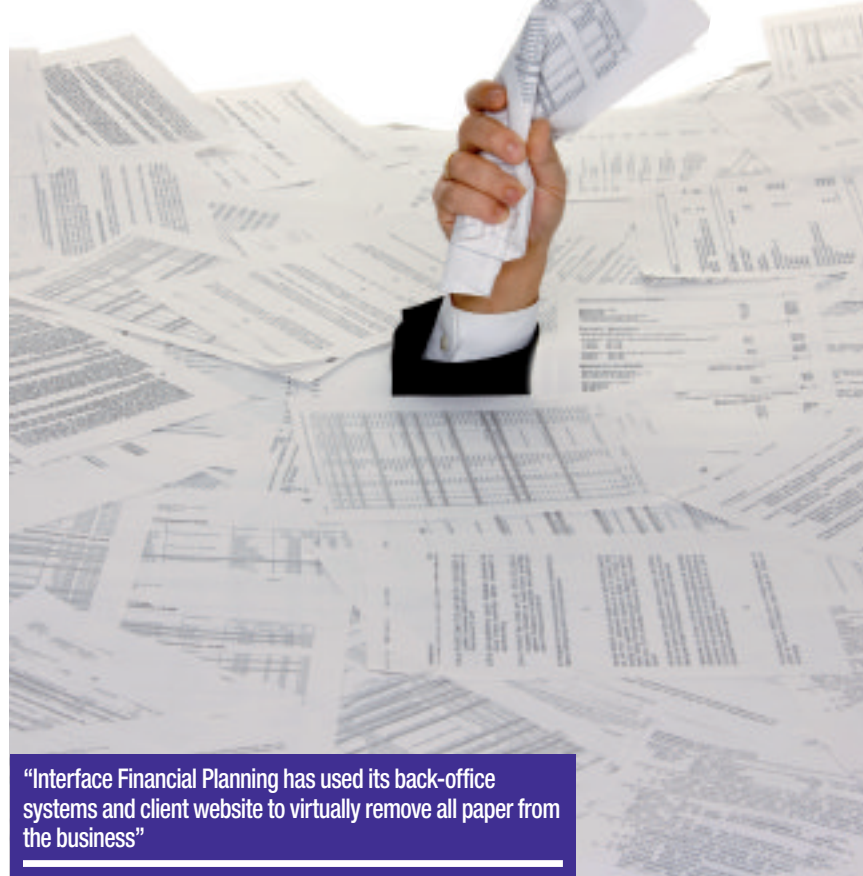
Social networking feature

Looking ahead, Interface is looking to add social networking features to its website. It is an area Moran is clearly researching in depth. He has several books on the subject of Facebook and Twitter, and is attending IFALife and LinkedIn courses to ensure he doesn't just have the means to use the technology but knows how to apply it to best effect. Moran is working closely with IFA Systems to take advantage of the opportunities that social networking presents.

The technology story at Interface does not stop there. Interface uses the Cofunds platform for asset management, with its transaction feed direct to AO, Assureweb and Exweb for quotations, Financial Express for price feeds and Financial Analytics for fund analysis.

A people business

However, despite the proliferation of technology in this business, Interface has never lost sight of the fact that it is a people business. One look at the website will show any visitor that the Interface team understands what drives people. The team recognises that for most clients, financial planning is a means to an end and not an end in itself. In the same way, Interface uses technology purely as a means to an end. As such, it facilitates communication and drives efficiencies in the background but doesn't replace the adviser or the human touch. Interface is a charming yet efficient business from which many larger organisations could learn some valuable lessons.



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