



Virtual verdict

DIFC Courts has already drawn praise from the British, Qatari and Tanzanian governments for its work with technology. Committed to delivering the 'GCC's first' digital and virtual court, senior IT manager **Arul Jose Vigin** deployed a unified communications solution that allows hearings to go ahead even if participants are scattered across the globe.

It's no secret that the legal industry is slow to adopt technology. Leather-bound books, Georgian-style wigs and imposing courtrooms spring to mind when you think of some of the world's most established justice systems. It seems ironic that an industry that depends so heavily on information and transparency is shrouded in mystery for many. When it comes to technology, DIFC Courts, however, is aiming to shake up the status quo.



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Established in October 2007 by the chief justice of DIFC Courts, and from its inception, the Small Claims Tribunal (SCT) was had a mandate to be a paperless organisation that delivers digital end-to-end case management. The SCT deals with issues relating to employment and tenancy, while SMEs based outside of DIFC's free zone jurisdiction can resolve disputes if both parties agree to settle a case under DIFC's laws.

Over 90 percent of cases in the Small Claims Tribunal are resolved in under four weeks, and DIFC Courts has made it a priority to ensure that those involved in cases have as stress-free an experience as possible. A similar percentage of cases are initially registered through DIFC Courts' e-registry service.

"DIFC Courts was the first court in the region to go paperless," Arul Jose Vigin, senior IT manager, DIFC Courts, says. "Cases can be managed online, and technology covers the entirety of our operations. It's important to be a customer-centric, innovative court, and part of that means being

connected, as technology and good customer service go hand-in-hand." Being digitally enabled also allows DIFC Courts to increase its own legitimacy to the public. "Being able to digitally publish the progress of each case meant that DIFC Courts has increased transparency."

Joining DIFC Courts just over a year ago, Vigin was determined to transfer his previous technology experience across financial and government organisations into work that could further cement DIFC Courts and the Dispute Resolution Authority's – the holding company for DIFC Courts – reputation as the GCC's first digital court. Although DIFC Courts had progressed very well in terms of delivering online services, there was an acknowledgement that more could be done to reduce the need for parties to attend a physical court hearing. "It's common for people who are involved in employment disputes to have left the UAE, and be unable to return," Vigin says. "For DIFC Courts to be truly virtual, we needed a solution that would allow people who fit these

circumstances to participate in a case from wherever they are."

DIFC Courts is governed by English common law, and its verdicts are enforced in jurisdictions including England, Wales, New York and Singapore. This global status provided further incentive for DIFC Courts to deliver a solution that facilitates discussions that could traverse physical borders. "The business language of the world is English," Vigin says. "People want what they know works, and they get that with DIFC Courts."

In August 2016, Vigin began exploring ways that DIFC Courts could deliver a remote hearing experience, and analysed various technology options that could help to build a virtual courtroom. "Businesspeople and investors are always busy," Vigin says. "They constantly move across the board, and aren't always in the country to resolve issues when they are needed. We decided that instead of a court being a physical place, it could be a virtual network, as we want to be available for parties whenever and wherever they are."

Vigin decided that DIFC Courts needed a unified communications solution that could enable the seamless delivery of virtual court cases. Ensuring court confidentiality was an important priority when he began the hunt for new technologies, a solution needing to be secure and compliant with Dubai's laws. Vigin was also adamant that the technology would have to be mobile-friendly, with users being able to comfortably move their experience across devices.

After scouring the market for potential options, Vigin opted to deploy Polycom's CX5500 unified conference station, its RealPresence Clariti software and Microsoft Skype for Business. The implementation was "smooth", and took 45 days to



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Antoinette Sandbach, United Kingdom MP

complete, with the newly-formed 'Smart SCT' up and running by October 2016, becoming the "GCC's first virtual court".

The solution has been designed so that parties who are being hooked into virtual cases can do so without a need for any particular model of device. Court scheduling is set three days in advance of a hearing, and this allows Vigin to send a URL that allows any parties to participate in a virtual case at the click of a button.

"The Smart STC provides highly convenient and less disruptive remote hearings," Vigin says. "Scheduling parties' time becomes easier, which results in faster settlements. We are now less dependent on physical facilities, and this is a huge step in enhancing the brand value of DIFC Courts, demonstrating our pursuit of innovation and excellence."

The whole experience delivered by the virtual courtroom also helps to put participants at ease, Vigin says. The psychological effect of a "friendlier" courtroom makes the experience less

intimidating for a party, as they can avoid a potentially stressful hearing in a physical courtroom. "You can participate in a court case in your living room or at your desk – you could even be wearing your pyjamas and slippers," Vigin quips.

The Smart SCT has already received international acclaim, and has been visited by Tanzanian and Qatari delegations, who are now keen to follow DIFC Courts' example. What's more, a group of eight members of parliament (MPs) from the United Kingdom visited DIFC Courts in April for a first-hand look at how the Smart SCT operates, and the role it plays in attracting businesses to the UAE. MP for Eddisbury, Antoinette Sandbach, lauded the project on her visit. "The Smart SCT is a very interesting development here, particularly because it works so quickly," she said. "I think that has great advantages for commercial relationships, and it actually looks like this small claims system works more effectively and quickly than ours does back in the UK."

Vigin draws great pride from the praise that the project has garnered in its short tenure. "The prospect of solving disputes online has been discussed for some time around the world, but relatively little progress has actually been made," he says. "The legal industry has not been revolutionised by technology in the same way that other industries have. Courts still have a need for physical documents. However, we are transforming our services for a modern court system."

Plans are in the pipeline to enhance the Courts' reach, with Vigin hoping to expand the satellite environment to include several Dubai free zones, including Dubai Multi Commodities Centre. ■

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