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The Case for Practice Management Systems

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Computerized case management systems have been around for almost two decades. They've always promised to make law firms and law departments more efficient, but have often fallen short of those promises.

In many ways, over the years, the fault should be shared between the high expectations of lawyers and the unmet promises of the developers.

Case management systems are in their fourth generation. The first generation tied a case database to document generation, albeit its own built-in word processor. The second generation, in DOS, integrated Corel Inc.'s WordPerfect and Microsoft Corp.'s Word.

The third iteration, "co-opetition," brought integration with competing companies, such as a case management system that integrated with third-party time, billing and accounting systems or document management systems.

The fourth generation, that we're in now, brings workflow into the mix -- the ability to automatically route items, tasks, documents and events, or send alerts to certain people, based on their role in the case. This workflow concept is not new in the computer industry, but it's fairly new in the legal software industry. Case management systems have come quite a long way, but still have a little way to go.

As many people remind us, "There is no Holy Grail in case management." No one owns the CMS market, never has and probably never will. Certainly there are some market leaders, or a perception of market leaders.

There's also confusion in the industry as to what exactly case management system software is, and isn't. Here are some definitions:

- Financial management systems are time, billing and accounting systems.
- Case management systems manage cases, but are typically geared toward litigators. These systems are strong in tracking case-related information.
- Matter management systems are typically geared toward transactional attorneys, who don't really deal with "cases," they handle "matters." These systems are strong in document assembly for document intensive practices.
- Case and matter management systems often are the same application and the term is more market driven than anything else -- if the developers are courting litigators, they're more likely to call their software case management. If they're courting corporate lawyers or transactional lawyers, they're more likely to call their software matter management. They basically do the same thing and have the same functions.
- Document management systems manage documents. But don't be deceived. They not only handle word processing systems, but they also handle spreadsheets, graphics, e-

mails (and attachments) and possibly voice mail. Document management systems can handle almost any type of file on a computer system.

- The piéce de résistance is practice management system software -- that manages your entire practice. It includes components of time and billing, accounting, case/matter management and document management. Ahh, finally, an all-in-one system.

ALL IN ONE?

Now that we've properly defined practice management systems, is there any reason why a law firm would not purchase an all-in-one practice management system? Remember that "Holy Grail" statement?

There are plenty of reasons why a law firm should look at implementing a full practice management system. First, if you've got a problem or a question, you've only got one developer or integrator to call; the system screens all have the same look and feel, and the information flow is the same.

Second, all information is stored in one system; you don't have to look through one system, then another, then another to find specific client or case/matter information.

For example, if you're looking for anything related to "Josephina Blow," you'd do a single search and the system would look through the time, billing and accounting system to find invoices or client costs.

At the same time, the system would look through the document management system to find any documents generated by the firm or received externally; same with e-mail (and attachments).

It would also look through the case/matter database to locate information, whether it is a case your firm is handling or the fact that Ms. Blow also is an expert witness in computer technologies.

Sounds pretty good doesn't it? You can almost think of this type of search as a Google-type search of your firm's data, even though there's no relationship whatsoever with Google -- that's just an example.

If there are several attorneys and staff in your firm working on the same case/matter, they'd all have access to the same information at the same time.

Ask yourself how many times have you gone to look for the physical file, only to find that it's in another attorney's office, or worse, the attorney has taken it home.

With the physical file, only one person can have that information at any one time.

With the computerized practice management system, everyone with authorized access can simultaneously have that same information at any time.

INITIAL QUESTION

So, let's get back to the initial question: why would a law firm or law department not want an all-in-one practice management system?

The answer is really in your requirements for the various functions of a practice management system.

For example, if your firm already has a financial management system (time, billing and accounting), they may not want to replace it.

You might hear your comptrollers and/or bookkeepers use the phrase, "over my dead body," if you start talking about replacing their accounting systems. Same goes if the firm already has a document management system in place.

Another, more important reason is what many developers refer to as "best of breed." Just because a developer has a practice management system doesn't mean it is as strong on the back end as it is on the front end, and vice versa.

There are many systems out there that started out as a time, billing and accounting system and developers spent years developing the system. Then, for various reasons, the developer starts working on adding functionality that further defines it as a case/matter management and they now call it a practice management system. It's very strong on the back end, but may be very weak on the front end.

But because we're in the fourth generation of practice management systems, many systems have the necessary integrations to work with other systems.

BIGGEST MISTAKE

The biggest mistake law firms and law departments make when purchasing practice management or case/matter management systems is not doing their homework.

There are two major factors to take into consideration. First, understand your firm's technology environment and the culture -- what systems, both hardware and software, are in place and how do your attorneys and staff use them.

This is often called the assessment phase. Knowing how information flows through your firm or department is crucial to helping you select the right practice or case/matter management system.

Second, understand the differences between the practice management programs and try to match the right application to your firm's needs.

This is often called the implementation phase. Remember: "There is no Holy Grail in computerized case and matter management systems."

There is no one size fits all. Every law firm and law department works differently and they have different cultures and different needs.

Of course, that's what makes this a great industry -- there are dozens of ways of doing the same thing. The outcome is what's most important.

Because many readers want to know, the following is a list of software developers with a full practice management system that includes back office (time, billing, accounting) and front office (case/matter management, document management):

- Perfect Practice;
- Client Profiles;
- Perfect Law;
- ProLaw.

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