Regardless of firm size, shape or concerns, law offices are hard pressed to efficiently handle their client’s cases without the use of a case management software program. In fact, practice management software, as it’s called by many these days, is designed to provide effective tools for handling or managing your firm’s information — and not just case information. The distinguishing feature of case management software is the client’s case or matter feature, which allows the firm to put a copy of its physical files on the computer. This feature is at the center of case management software, just as files are at the center of a law practice. By examining the problems that exist in firms and the features of the time-saving and money-making case management programs, you truly can fix what is ailing your law practice with this type of software.

Exactly what is case management software and why has it become so necessary in the modern law practice? The short answer is case management software is the central data filing and organizational system for law offices. The need to organize and work around the offices’ files is imperative in all law firms. The integration provided by this software makes it necessary for all firms, no matter their size or practice areas.

**Main Features**

As a general rule, case management software packages usually have several main features.

**Files.** All of the information for case files can be arranged and kept in the case manager. This feature makes the genre of legal-specific case management what it is. No other calendaring and task managing combination program includes this vital part for attorneys. Not even the popular systems such as Microsoft Outlook can brag they have cases or files as a feature. Without a file-centric system, firms are forced to build their systems around contact and event records that don’t always give enough flexibility in terms of accessing data in logical places. With case management software, everything about a client’s matter can be found on that client’s case or matter file. Because data is stored on the computer, users can save time while also capturing more time for completed work rather than wasting billable hours looking for files.

Users often are shocked to learn how much can be earned in a year by implementing a case management system. For example, if an attorney spends 15 minutes a day looking for a file and typically charges $100 per hour, the year-end savings would come to more than $5,200 if those hours were spent doing billable work at the hourly rate. This example also could take into account lost time for staff members and their overhead rate versus any time they might bill as well. The total cost of implementation of a case management system often is less than $5,000 in a small law office. The case management program quickly and easily can pay for itself.

**Calendaring/Appointments.** Both group and individual calendars are a standard feature in case managers. A lot of flexibility is given to users who need to reset appointments, schedule a chain of events together or create recurring appointments. Some case management vendors have teamed
up with companies offering built-in calendaring rules for various jurisdictions to further speed up the calendaring and docketing process.

To-Do Lists. Case management vendors have included proactive, interactive task or To-Do lists that make keeping deadlines easy. Most case managers also make it easier to delegate and track the status of tasks. Various alarms and reminders can be set for these items. Automatic forwarding of To-Do lists allows you to take care of neglected items electronically.

Contacts. Taking over from the contact management or personal information managers that were introduced first in the sales and marketing industries, contacts in case managers allow users to include all contact information for people and companies the firm encounters. The contacts feature outperforms the more general contact management systems because it integrates with other information found in the case manager. Being able to add contacts to files and calendars is one of the greatest things about case management software.

Phone Call Management. Users can track incoming and outgoing telephone calls. Even though the user might not know whether the ringing phone will result in tracking the conversation or not, the ability to easily manage phone messages is a standard part of every case management system.

E-mail Integration. Most, if not all, case managers have the ability to include client and other e-mails on the file. Many programs synchronize with Outlook and other popular e-mail programs, allowing incoming e-mails to be attached to client files. Other programs allow users to treat incoming e-mails just like other documents to be included on client files.

Notes. Mainly as a part of their “Files” feature, case managers don’t overlook the need for extensive space to keep and track general case information such as memos. Firms sometimes use notes for case planning and communications tracking.

Research. Legal research can be conducted and integrated with the case files in case management systems. This is yet another vital part of the law practice front end. When the programs started to evolve toward more full-bodied practice management products, this was one of the first areas to be added beyond the basic features.

This also points out why it might be best to call it practice management software rather than case management software. From a technical standpoint, case management software typically is a relational database. The interrelated tables of data allow users to enter data in one place. The same data then is found in every other place it could be needed, without the user having to enter the data again. This makes case management software a true timesaver in a busy law firm environment.

Customizing various parts of the software is easy. The functionality of the programs is enhanced by allowing the tables to be accessible from both Corel WordPerfect and Microsoft Word. As fields are completed in the case management software, they become available in Word and WordPerfect documents.

With the ability to “open” the database, users can see the need to move the data from the case management software programs to time entry applications for billing and accounting. Time entry functionality is found in most small- and mid-sized firm case management programs, but most don’t handle billing or accounting functions. Instead, the case data is entered as time entries that are sent or “posted” to the time billing and accounting applications. Large firm programs will combine all of the front office or case management features into one database that also handles time billing and accounting. Some programs for larger firms allow users to view billing data on the client’s case management file.

Typically, a case management system has a bi-directional link of clients’ names, addresses and phone numbers. This means users can open a case from either the case management program or the time and billing application, and have the item appear in the other database at the same time. As for the time entries, these items pass only from the case management program to the time and billing program. This means users can track their time in the case manager and then transfer that time into the back office time and billing program, but not the reverse.

The Small Firm

The informational needs of solos, while similar to the larger firms, revolve around general organization of data and access to that data. A typical solo or small law office needs to have everything about a file in a common place. You find firms still are “losing” the file in the office, searching for telephone numbers and attempting to remember if there is a conflict of interest with the new client and a for-
mer client. Without a system that can organize the pertinent client information, the solo and small law office staff will struggle to find a way to put everything about a client in one place. Small firms also have a need to generate documents more quickly and reduce the number of steps it takes to create, store and retrieve documents. The document assembly and document management features in case management software can take users to this next level. Some of the most popular case management choices for solo and small law offices are:

- Gavel & Gown Software Inc.’s Amicus Attorney, www.amicusattorney.com
- Alumni Computer Group’s PCLaw, www.pclaw.com
- Software Technology Inc.’s Practice Master, www.practicemaster.com

For this class of firms, there also are some practice-specific case managers, such as Chesapeake Interlink’s Needles (www.needleslaw.com) for personal injury firms. Bankruptcy, immigration and real estate firms also can find programs that have case management-like features, but sometimes will need to use two different programs to keep up with transactions and client case and matter files. Most firms will need to develop procedural workarounds to deal with having a case manager and software programs that keep similar information but don’t link to the case manager.

**The Mid-sized Firm**

Mid-sized law practices also need to be able to locate documents and track data on client files. However, this size firm often ends up with several groups working together on matters. The case management software will need to offer office-enhanced conflict checking, document management and integrated calendaring features. Flexibility in terms of customizing the application is of great concern to mid-sized firms, as they often are required to work on multiple matters with many people in the firm. By customizing the database, the information for multiple case types can be handled in a central area.

Case management systems available for medium-sized firms are plentiful. Some of the most popular options for mid-sized firms are:

- Client Profiles, www.clientprofiles.com
- ADC Legal Systems Inc.’s Perfect Practice, www.perfectpractice.com
- Thomson Elite’s ProLaw, www.prolaw.com
- Omega Legal Systems Inc.’s Omega Legal, www.omegalegal.com

**Finding the Best Solution**

There are many different case managers on the market, and it’s not uncommon to find a system that would be better suited for a large- or mid-sized law firm in a solo or small firm practitioner’s office. How can firms determine what is best for them when it...
comes to case management software? With case management software prices ranging from around $300 per user to more than $1,000, it's important for firms to shop wisely. When shopping for case management software, make sure to:

- Look at the features provided in the programs and learn firsthand how they work. Most practice management software vendors provide downloadable demonstration copies of their programs. For large-firm products, seek demonstrations or sample implementations from the vendors.
- Look at product reviews and articles from legal-specific publications. Pay attention to the pros and cons as discussed in reviews or articles by case management users who are situated similarly to your firm.
- Look at what you already have in terms of hardware and software. Analyze your current technology and determine if the specifications of the case management program you are looking for will fit into your current technology mix. Determine if you will need to upgrade or change your environment.
- Look at what is being used by colleagues in firms of similar size and practice areas. Realize when you are shopping for a new case management system, you don't have to reinvent the wheel. Pay attention to your needs and match them with the solutions being provided by case management software.

After determining what program will work best for your firm, keep in mind some general precepts for case management software implementation.

Write out a plan for the implementation. This process, even when done informally, will help the firm successfully implement case management software. Write down the functions you need in the systems you plan to implement, the hardware requirements, the people involved with implementation and their roles, your customization needs based on how the software works and everything else you can think of that will help to get the system running properly.

Get proper training. No matter how familiar you are with similar features from other packages, you need to be trained on the solution your firm chooses. You must learn the features of the tools you will use. With proper training, you will not waste time and money trying to teach yourself. Just think of how long it would have taken you to learn to be a lawyer without going to law school. Hire a certified consultant or trainer for the software to assist you and everyone in the firm.

Get proper buy-in from the ground up. Make sure staff and the leaders of the firm are all in agreement and are excited about the improvement of the practice through careful and steady technology advances. Make sure everyone understands the economics of the decision. Whether it's the secretary who will no longer have to go to every single office in the firm and manually update the contact information for the new judge, or the senior partner who can capture more billable time using the system, teach your firm that this system will help save time, make more money and deliver legal services more efficiently.

Be patient. It might take quite some time for the firm members to completely learn the various parts of the systems. Patiently apply each new level of features continuously over time. Don't give up at just the basics and don't get left too far behind in the software's inherent upgrade cycle.

Don't start from scratch if you don't have to. Use every electronic source of data you have to get going. Have a certified consultant review the current status of your technology and help migrate as much data as possible into your new system. Even if you maintain a list of clients in a word processor, data can be moved from one application to another so you don't have to start with an empty database.

**Case Management Success**

With a number of applications to choose from, no firm should suffer with an unorganized office when it comes to client cases. Use this information to help choose and implement a case management software program to better manage your entire law practice. 

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