

E-Mail Message Clutter:

How Matter Management Software Can Reduce It

by Matt Ryan of Legal Files Software, Inc.

An attorney and I recently talked over lunch about the matter management software his office was about to implement. He was excited about the benefits he hoped to see, but he still had concerns about managing the e-mail clutter that had grown to be such a huge problem at his firm.

Being proactive, the attorney's IT staff had already instituted spam filters and other e-mail message controls, which had gotten rid of most of the junk. Still, that left many important messages exchanged between staff, co-counsel and other parties that needed to be dealt with as efficiently as possible. According to the attorney, on a typical day he sent or received some 100 messages.

"That may not seem like much to some people," he said, "But for me it's like being caught in a cyber-tidal wave."

My lunch-mate was also worried that sharing pertinent e-mail messages with others was only increasing the clutter for those people.

"If I send all the appropriate parties a copy of a message regarding some matter," he said, "then I've simply added to their e-mail burden."

As the attorney and I discussed various e-messaging strategies, I offered some ways in which his new matter management program could help tame the wild beast.

Save It. Share It. Scrap It.

Rightfully so, people keep e-mail messages because they don't want to lose the information contained in or attached to a message—and they want it readily available to share with the people with whom they work. But corralling it—that's the rub. This is precisely what matter management systems can do.

Most of these systems link with all the popular e-mail programs (e.g., Outlook, GroupWise, Lotus Notes), and make it

easy to organize and save messages to their related matters. What's more, all the people with access to that matter can view the attached e-mail messages without needing additional copies, thereby reducing clutter for everyone. And once saved to a matter, original messages can be deleted from the in/sent boxes for that lean and clean look IT managers adore.

Public Folders or Public Enemy

Once upon a time, this attorney had attempted to manage his and his colleagues' e-mail message clutter by moving messages to a public or shared folder, creating one folder per matter where all involved staff could store their messages. However, what at first appeared to be a dream solution soon turned into a logistical nightmare. Some matters involved certain staff members, while others involved a completely different group. And being sensitive to potential conflicts or protecting attorney-client confidentiality, it was discovered that setting up the proper security access for each folder was no easy task, and that giving all staff rights to all folders proved too broad.

That's a big advantage to a matter management system. Its built-in security features make it easy to assign access rights. Only the people assigned to a matter get access to the e-mail messages and other information linked to the matter.

What's the Matter?

Matter Management is ideal for legal issues, but that's certainly not all it's good for in a law firm. "Matter" can take many forms, including:

- ~ An office project you're working on
- ~ Board meeting minutes
- ~ Private personnel information
- ~ Staff community involvement tracking
- ~ Information on committees on which you serve

Because the e-mail messages you receive often relate to these types and topics,

your matter management system can help you save and share these messages.

Internal Affairs

Have you noticed that many of the e-mail messages that fly around your office are between and among your own staff members? That's SOP. This is why some matter management systems provide an alternate way for staff to communicate without using conventional e-messaging. This internal messaging or "routing" can significantly reduce e-mail message traffic. So rather than handling multiple e-mail messages on a topic, you only have to manage a single message with the entire "conversation" attached to it.

This is especially helpful when an attorney drafts a document that an assistant will proof and print, or vice versa. Instead of sending e-mail messages with the document attached (which creates two messages and two copies of the document—the sender's and the recipient's—simply "route" the document from one person to another. It's like sending a shortcut or link to the document. No additional e-mail message is created and the routing link can be easily removed when the document is completed.

Go for an Uncluttered Look in 2003!

If reducing e-mail message clutter is on your list of "Must-Do's" for the year, implementing matter management software can help you reach that goal by giving your office a valuable tool for managing e-mail messages and other matter-related information.

I'm betting the attorney I talked with is discovering that for himself.

About our author . . .

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