Critical Steps for a Successful Data Conversion

Moving Legacy Data to Your Case Management System

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Executive Summary

This white paper discusses conversion methodology for migrating data from your organization's existing data sources into a legal case and matter management software system. It is intended for those involved with the selection, purchase or implementation of a case management system.

In many ways, selecting a new legal case management system is much like finding a new office location. Just as an office is where your staff, furniture and equipment reside, a case management system is where your organization's essential file and client related information lives. This includes items such as matter-related contacts, calendars, tasks, email, documents, deadlines, notes, research and data.

Therefore, it follows that the process of converting data from your existing system into your new case management program is equivalent to relocating from your current office to a new one. Making this kind of move is not something you have done—or should do—very often. That's why you should have a detailed, well-thought-out plan to follow, as well as an experienced moving team that can guide you through the process and anticipate roadblocks to help make the transition as smooth as possible.

This paper will introduce you to the issues and challenges of the data conversion process using office-moving comparisons as examples to highlight and explain critical factors for a successful data conversion prior to implementing a case management system.

Find The Right Location

Every organization is unique. And whether you're looking for new office space or a new case management system, the first step is to find the one that's right for you—the first time. Picking the wrong one, which forces you to move to another location or system, can be a costly mistake you will want to avoid.

How do you select the right system initially? If relocating your office, you would first develop an inventory of your present needs and anticipate future growth to determine your requirements. Will you require office space spanning multiple floors in a high-rise building? Or will a single-story space meet your current and long-term needs? By making your decision solely based upon the lowest priced lease, you could end up in an office that's too small or which lacks the infrastructure or facilities to handle future expansion. You would quickly outgrow the space and be forced to move again too soon. That can be very costly, not to mention disruptive to your office's productivity. If you choose a space that's too large, you might overpay for unnecessary and unused space and amenities. And in today's competitive, cost-conscious environment, what business can afford that waste?

Likewise, before you select a new case management system, it is important to assess your present and future data needs. In that process, you will create a requirements document to use as your checklist of essential elements (basic functions, ease of customization, integration with existing systems, etc.), which must exist in or can be added to the program you select. This document will serve as your guide to objectively evaluate and compare the features of each prospective system.

Scalability, however, is perhaps one of the most important—yet overlooked—issue to consider when selecting a case management system. Scalability is measured by the ease in which a system can handle increased capacity (i.e., more clients, matters, users, documents, departments, practice groups, locations, data, etc.), without experiencing performance problems.

When scalability issues are not considered and price alone drives the purchase decision, organizations make a mistake by implementing a system which does not meet their needs in the long run. Too often, organizations think they're saving money upfront, but in the end they wind up spending much more than the cost of the system (and whatever they spent on a

conversion) when they find they bought the wrong system and need to replace it.

To avoid this common mistake, think of your case management purchase, just as you would an office move, as a major commitment that will have considerable long-term impact. It is important to anticipate all your present and future requirements as best you can *before* you select one, so your business ends up with the best fit for both your needs and budget. Be sure your case management implementation budget includes the cost of data conversion, in addition to the cost of the software, training and other project management assistance. Choose the vendor you feel is best suited to handle your entire project, and not the least-costly option in the short term.

Check The Mover's Qualifications

Office moves are complex projects that can seem overwhelming. And it's understandable that you will be nervous until all your furniture and equipment arrive safely at your new location. That's why choosing an experienced mover will help save you money, reduce stress and make sure nothing is lost or damaged in transit.

Likewise, custom data conversions are no simple task. And those who say otherwise have either not been directly involved with such a project, or the data they converted was very basic, such as importing a list of contacts. This may be your first (and only) opportunity to plan a successful data conversion project, so it is important to team with a vendor that has handled conversions similar in scope and complexity. Follow these guidelines to help select the best vendor:

- **Check the team's roster**. Ask about the qualifications of the vendor's team members who have been involved with conversion projects. Is this something the vendor can handle in house or is it out sourced? A seasoned vendor is more likely to possess the experience and skills required to efficiently and competently handle your conversion project. Your data is valuable, so don't entrust it to someone who is learning on the job.

- **Talk to references**. Ask the vendors on your short list to supply you with the names of customers for whom they have done similar conversions. Ask those references how their project was handled. Was it completed on time and within budget? Ask about the vendor's project leadership and conversion team members. Were they qualified? Responsive? Easy to work with? You should select a vendor who understands your data conversion needs and who will be friendly, helpful and responsive throughout the process.

- **Get an estimate**. Based on the amount, type and complexity of data to be converted, you should receive an estimate which either states a total price or provides an itemized list of conversion options from which to choose, with prices listed for each additional option or service. With conversion estimates, an old adage applies: If the price seems too good to be true, it probably is. Most established, reputable case management vendors will provide fair and competitive estimates.

Although their prices will differ, the bids should fall within a reasonable range. If one estimate comes in significantly below the others, that should be a red flag to more closely examine and compare the items included in the bid before accepting it.

- **Ask a friend**. The best recommendations come from satisfied customers. If you know another organization that has gone through a similar data conversion and case management implementation, ask for their recommendation (or warning) about which vendor to choose. Their first-hand accounts can help steer you in the right direction.

Be wary of the "Move-It-Yourself" option

Instead of hiring professional movers to handle your office relocation, you probably wouldn't rent a truck, buy your own packing supplies and ask your friends and coworkers to do the job. Although a do-it-yourself move might be less expensive, it would also be incredibly time consuming and exhausting, plus things are bound to get dropped and broken in transit.

Likewise, some case management systems offer do-it-yourself conversion utilities. These self-import tools provide limited flexibility and typically only import contact records or basic file information. While you may be able to save money using one of these conversion tools, if you have more complex data or multiple data sources to convert into a single case management system, a custom conversion is your better option.

Make A Floor Plan

Before you move, you want to make sure all your furniture and equipment will fit inside your new space. That's why your next step is to make a detailed floor plan of what goes where. Every item will be measured, labeled and listed on the floor plan so nothing gets missed, and the movers will know exactly where each piece of furniture needs to be placed.

Similarly, conversion data mapping fulfills the same purpose as making a floor plan, and it is *the* most important step in the conversion process. Not only is it an item-by-item road map which will be followed to move your data to your new case management program, it also defines the specific rules which will be applied during the conversion process. These mapping rules govern *how* data is moved into your case management system to match how you intend to use the new system. For example, you may want certain fields or screens used only in specific case types (e.g., a litigation file vs. an estate matter).

Since the vendor built the system and knows it inside out, the vendor should write the data mapping document. At this point in the process, it's understandable that you will have limited knowledge of the new case management system. Even if you did review the system's data structure, it would be of little meaning to you. Therefore, let the vendor show you how (and why) things work and the ways in which the various parts of the system are inter-related. What's most important is that you learn and understand how information flows through the new case management system, its capabilities, how it can be customized and how integrations with other programs work. You can (and should) take advantage of the vendor's extensive product knowledge and benefit from best practices they have compiled from their previous data conversions.

The data mapping process will be directed by the vendor's project manager and implementation team members. As needed, they will seek input from a few key staff members at your office who understand your existing data systems, as well as your current and future business requirements. Additionally, IT staff from both the vendor and your office will consult with one another to gain an understanding of the technical environment and requirements necessary for the data conversion and software rollout.

The data mapping process will identify all data sources to be converted, assign a specific database field to every item and explain any rules or logic

that apply to the data during conversion. Your source data could take several forms, such as an existing case management system, Excel spreadsheets, Access files or other databases, which have been used by different departments or practice groups to track information related to their matters.

Once the data mapping is complete, the vendor's developers will write and test the conversion program using a sample of your data. At this point, it is critical that you *do not* change the structure of your own data or that of the new case management system. The leading cause for data conversion failure is that changes were made at some point *after* the data mapping process began. All it takes is for someone to add a field or delete a column header, and the conversion process will not work. If something must be changed, immediately communicate it to the vendor. Most importantly, any changes made after the data mapping process has ended will likely cause you to incur additional expense, adversely affect the conversion process timetable and delay your implementation.

Common Data Mapping Issues

During the data mapping process, you are likely to encounter some incompatibility issues with your legacy data, including:

- **Inconsistent use of a data field**. Your legacy data may contain certain fields, like "Client Name," where users have in some instances listed the client as "John Smith" and other times as "Smith, John."

- **Poorly designed data structure**. Your existing database may contain some "date" fields which are actually "text" fields in which users may have entered dates in a variety of formats (e.g., November 19, 2017, Nov. 19th 2017 or 11/19/17).

- **One field holds multiple data elements**. For example, you may have an address field where the various elements (e.g., line 1, line 2, city, state or ZIP) are not clearly and consistently entered or separated, making it more difficult to convert the data. Or, you have multiple pieces of data stored in single note fields (such as a phone log), which you want broken out as separate entries in the new case management system.

- **Multiple data sources**. You may have used more than one source, for example an Excel file and an Access database, to track different data

related to the same clients or matters. In the conversion, you now wish to combine data from the two sources to create or maintain relationships between that information, and there is no unique identifier which consistently links data from the different systems.

- **Documents lacking proper organization**. You may have documents stored on network or local drives that you wish to move into the case management program's more structured document management system. Those documents may not currently have consistent naming conventions or folder structures, which will make it difficult to apply logic or rules to link the documents to the proper cases and with sufficient categorization (i.e., pleadings, contracts, correspondence, etc.).

- **Source data does not match target**. Your current data sources may track information for which comparable fields do not exist in your new case management system. If you determine that a field is of minor importance, you can choose to either exclude it from the conversion altogether or convert the data in its present form to the closest field type in your new system. Hopefully, your new system will provide the flexibility to easily create custom data windows and fields to accommodate all your special conversion requirements so no important data is lost.

Converting this type of inconsistent data into your new case management system is obviously problematic and potentially quite costly for you if a conversion program must be written to account for all possible variations. As part of the data mapping process, you must consult with your vendor to decide if the data in these fields is worth converting, being converted as is or should be cleansed prior to conversion.

The Walk-Through

When you finally move into your new office, you want the condition of everything to be as expected. That's why, prior to moving in, you should do a walk-through, armed with a list of items to check. This is your time to do a thorough, office-by-office inspection to make sure that everything operates as expected, the build-out was completed to your specifications and that any scheduled repairs have been finished. If you do find something that needs to be fixed or changed, now's the time to mention it.

In the data conversion process, this phase is known as acceptance testing. This is your opportunity to review your sample data in the new case management system, checking to make sure that everything has been properly converted prior to the final conversion and the scheduled system implementation "go live" date.

Diligent, detailed and timely acceptance testing is critical for a successful conversion. While the data mapping workload was split 90/10, with the vendor handling 90 percent of the process, now the tables are turned. It is your responsibility to dedicate sufficient time to thoroughly test the sample converted data. Your testing team will likely comprise one or two staff members who are familiar with your data. In some instances with very complex conversions, a larger testing team is used in conjunction with automated testing routines or scripts to check and verify data, as well as to perform system stress or performance testing.

During acceptance testing, you should test the following to make sure your legacy data reconciles with the converted data:

- Was data converted according to the mapping rules defined in the data mapping document?

- Are there any required fields in the new case management system which were overlooked during the data mapping process?

- Was the correct number of records from the sample data created in the case new management system?

- Is further data cleansing required prior to the final conversion?

While the goal of the test conversion is 100 percent accuracy, it is quite likely that some items will not convert as expected, and you may want the vendor to run another test to verify any corrections you requested.

During acceptance testing, you should document in detail any inconsistencies or problems, summarize the findings in a standardized format and distribute that information to your vendor for analysis. After determining which items are to be corrected, the vendor will revise the conversion program to rectify those issues. If only a few simple issues are found, another test run may not be required prior to the final conversion. However, it is reasonable to assume that another round of acceptance testing will take place in a timely manner, based on the number and complexity of changes which are required and the amount of sample data that must be rerun.

It is important that your vendor plan for at least two rounds of data review in your conversion process, with ample time for you to provide feedback. Any vendors who say otherwise underestimate the vital role acceptance testing plays during this phase of the project.

However, you and your vendor should agree in advance on the maximum amount of time allotted for the entire acceptance testing phase. Otherwise, acceptance testing can drag on unnecessarily and become a costly, time-consuming quagmire which jeopardizes your implementation schedule. With proper planning, solid data mapping and dedicated testers, your acceptance testing process should stay on course—and on time.

At the end of the acceptance testing process, you (your senior management or designate) will be asked to approve and sign off on the results. This final version of the conversion program will be used for the "go live" data conversion into your new case management system according to your installation/implementation schedule.

Moving Day

When moving day finally arrives, you want to avoid unnecessary delays or surprises by following your well-scripted plan to move everything and everyone with the least amount of interruption. Obviously, close coordination and communication with your mover is required for a successful, error-free relocation.

The same is true for your case management system "final" data conversion and "go live" implementation. In accordance with your conversion plan, you will extract data from your legacy system(s) and deliver it to your vendor, who will prepare the data for conversion, run the custom conversion program and load the final data into the new system. The time that it takes to export, convert and re-import will vary based on your data, but every effort should be made to minimize your firm's downtime. That is why, when possible, it is advisable to run the final conversion over a weekend (starting Friday evening), so that your system is ready to go Monday morning. You should check with your vendor to see if it has the capability to offer this type of "after-hours" service.

If a time window between the final conversion and "go live" dates is unavoidable, your implementation plan should address inputting the additional data into the new system as soon as possible.

Conclusion

Selecting a new case management system is major commitment for your business. And when converting your current data into that system, you don't want to make the wrong move. That's why the more prepared you are, the better your likelihood of success.

Therefore, it's critical to first choose the right case management system for your needs, making sure the vendor has the experience and capability to write a custom conversion program that will make the best use of your data. Be sure to compare suitable vendors on all required factors (especially scalability) and check references to make sure they can handle (and have handled) a project of your scope. While price is certainly a factor to consider, your selection criteria should include wide range of product features and vendor resources. You may think you're saving money with the least-expensive option, but you may eventually spend much more to replace the wrong system. That's a costly mistake you need to avoid.

Demand that your vendor create an acceptable conversion/implementation schedule, take the lead during the conversion process and walk you through mapping the data. It should be the vendor's responsibility to create the data mapping document and write the conversion program. However, it will be primarily on your shoulders to view, review and approve the test conversion data.

The final conversion and "go live" implementation should be planned for a time (best if done over a weekend) when it will minimize any downtime for your staff.

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