



SOFTWARE PRIMER FOR LAW FIRMS

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Attorneys have long had a love/hate relationship with technology. As Tina Turner sang, “What’s love gotta do with it?” The simple fact is that there is a wealth of software available for attorneys to use to organize their practices and produce their work product. You don’t have to be in love with technology to appreciate something which enables you to practice more efficiently, reduce malpractice risk, and to significantly enhance the bottom line.

As I travel around the state I am often asked “What’s out there?”, meaning what kinds of software are out there, and what can it do for the law firm. I am frequently contacted on the Pennsylvania Bar Association hot line with the same question. That’s because more and more of you are realizing that you cannot work harder, so the only alternative is to work smarter. And that’s where software comes in. If you want to leverage yourself without having to turn into one of the “large” firms, technology is the only effective tool you’ll have.

This article is a primer on just the “basic” or “building block” types of software for law firms, and what they can do for you. There is of course much more sophisticated software available. But one must walk before one can run.

An area of frequent confusion concerns Document Production, Document Assembly, and Document Management software. They sound very similar, but are not. Attorneys, legal staff and even some consultants, get them confused.

Document Production software is word processing. Nowadays that means Word or WordPerfect. I recommend that most firms be “word processing ambidextrous”, meaning that you have both software packages and be able to produce documents on both efficiently. The determination as to whether you should make Word or WordPerfect your “primary” package will depend on lots of factors.

Document Assembly software is used to generate documents from scratch using input forms and “intelligent” merges. Some attorneys developed very sophisticated merges in WordPerfect-DOS in the “old” days, which enabled them to

leverage their time very effectively. But unless you were extremely advanced, the logic one could use was still pretty limited. The Windows versions of Word or WordPerfect are still limited on the merges one can set up without fairly extensive knowledge. Document Assembly software enables you to more easily use advanced logic, so that depending on what you put on your input form, different paragraphs will be brought into your document. In other words, it isn't just filling in the blanks anymore.

As you might imagine, if you practice in areas which tend to be highly repetitive in the basic structure of your documents, like bankruptcy, banking, real estate, estates, wills, domestic relations, and certain types of litigation, using document assembly can dramatically reduce the time and effort needed to produce a good quality first draft.

Document Management software enables you to create an electronic "library card" for each document. You can determine what fields you want to track for each document. Normally they include author, typist, client name, client number, document type, document security, a long document name, and a narrative area in which you can enter free-form text regarding the document. Each of these fields is fully indexed and can be searched upon, alone or in combination with other fields. In addition, the actual contents of the document can be indexed and searched upon. What this means is that you don't have to know the directory structure someone used, or even the title of the document (remember those awful short filenames in DOS?) in order to find it. No more reinventing the wheel when you can *easily* and *quickly* find existing work product.

Some of you out there know how to go into Windows Explorer and use the FIND feature to search for documents. Document Management has a much more powerful feature set, which also includes the ability to track revisions of documents, assign security rights to documents to protect forms or preserve Chinese Walls, simultaneously search on multiple fields, search for key words and more. You can even report on activities by user, which provides comfort when you know you can monitor unusual printing or copying of files by a departing attorney. Comparing Document Management to the Find feature in Windows is like comparing a Hyundai to a Mercedes. Both are automobiles which will transport you from point A to point B, but there is a world of difference in the ride and creature comfort features.

The next area of frequent confusion is between Accounting and Time & Billing software. Accounting software manages the general ledger for the firm. That means your income and expenses, cash accounts, accounts payable, payroll,



and tax liabilities. This is where you do your bank reconciliations and produce your profit and loss and balance sheets. Time & billing is another “back office” software application. It manages your time entries and cost entries for your clients, tracks client trust funds, provides a printed pre-bill for each matter, produces your client bills and statements, provides your detailed accounts receivable, reveals which matters are profitable, and which are not. This software provides productivity reporting by attorney, fee reporting by originating, responsible and working attorneys, and much more. It maintains your conflict of interest information. And some software provides marketing information management as well. Some time & billing software *includes* accounting/general ledger functionality so you don’t need separate accounting software. Other time & billing packages provide *links* to exchange information with popular accounting software packages.

Desktop Productivity and Case Management software are similar packages in many ways. Each provides at least management of calendar, tasks or to-do’s, notes, rolodex or contacts, and integrates with word processing to produce letters, labels, and so forth. Desktop Productivity includes Microsoft’s Office, and Corel’s GroupWise. These packages provide an *attorney-focused* set of tools. Although calendars and contacts can be shared, they are still an attorney-focused product. Some firms work very hard to make this software work like Case Management software, but even with lots of tweaking, it still falls short of real Case Management software.

Case Management software provides a *case-centric* view of the calendar, documents, tasks, notes, contacts and so forth. In other words, when you open a client/matter, your documents, tasks, calendar items, contacts and so forth *for that matter* are visible with full details just a click or two away, regardless of who is working on the file. And all the information is designed to be shared. Some Case Management software has built in document management capabilities, email management capabilities, and conflict of interest checking. In addition, there are built-in reports in Case Management software, and the ability to do queries and filter through the information quickly and easily, without “programming” knowledge.

Some Case Management software includes “back office” applications like accounting and/or time & billing. Yet other case management software “links” to popular third party applications to perform those functions. And nowadays most Case Management software will synchronize to a personal digital assistant (PDA) device, so you can track your time anywhere, and have your contacts and calendar handy.



For firms wishing to manage their malpractice exposure, Case Management or Personal Productivity and Time & Billing and Accounting software should be high on your list. They will literally pay for themselves in saved attorney time, reduced accounting fees, and recapture of otherwise lost time or cost entries.

The software discussed above constitute the basics to consider. Beyond that there is a world of practice-specific software for just about any area of practice you can name, from banking to worker's compensation. There are a myriad of litigation support and knowledge management software packages. And don't even get me started on the utilities for everything from unattended back-up to PDA software, to that which ensures that what you erase from your hard drive remains unrecoverable.

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