

Blurred Boundaries: Case Management Systems for Small Firms Evolve

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March 2004

Talk about case management today and you're also talking about knowledge management. The essence of KM is to leverage the knowledge embedded in various systems and capture knowledge contained in our brains. Larger firms focus considerable resources acquiring "KM" systems. Smaller firms face different KM challenges and may have a head start over their larger counterparts.

Knowledge management encompasses the ability to gather and search many types of information whether in electronic or paper form -- paper documents scanned and made part of the file via my "Paper LESS Office" approach, e-mails, research materials from online sources, handwritten notes, electronic documents -- and the ability to "mine" that data.

Smaller firms have more potent case management choices than ever. Case managers blur the boundaries between what has been the traditional province of case managers and other applications. Case managers have traditionally focused on the three "C's": calendaring, case information tracking and conflict searching. Distinguishing between case managers, document managers, document assemblers, remote access tools for branch office and mobile/home user support, cross-data searching capability of knowledge management applications and even billing and accounting systems is a challenge. Could the evolution of case managers yield the mythical "killer legal app?" Perhaps.

Case managers today track a broad range of information in litigation and transactional matters. These systems also track firm administrative, practice development and marketing data. Case managers extend their document management capabilities, pushing into the territory once the exclusive realm of dedicated applications Worldox, iManage and Hummingbird. Case managers now can manage e-mail, and are earning a new acronym: EMS: e-mail management systems.

Case managers leverage varying data types:

- * case information, calendar and docketing entries
- * e-mail
- * time and cost entries and even comprehensive billing and accounting functions
- * document (encompassing traditional word processing documents, e-mails, spreadsheets, scanned images of documents, PDF files, even database files)

A lawyer using a modern case manager can view this information, search for it in a Google-like

manner, cross-reference it to other case information, generate documents from it and access it remotely on laptops, home computers, PDAs or a browser. Lawyers are enabled in bringing more knowledge to bear every day on every matter worked. The one with the most knowledge, most easily accessed . . . wins.

Looking at the case management marketplace today, with an emphasis on the large mass of smaller firms, several products stand out as leaders. These include, in no particular order:

Amicus Attorney - Gavel & Gown Software (www.amicusattorney.com). Long a favorite of small firms, the leader in “visual satisfaction” continues to exploit its comfortingly familiar graphical interface leveraging common law office management metaphors: the daybook, the red rope file, the shelf of law books. With innovations such as AAI - Anytime Anywhere Intelligence - information such as calendaring or case status information can be accessed from any e-mail enabled device including Blackberry Internet e-mail devices, laptops, PDAs and home systems without any human intervention back at the office. The first case manager to formally exploit the “thinking person’s document assembly system”, Ghostfill, the company offers Amicus Assembly, a tightly integrated, purpose-built version of this very powerful document generator.

PracticeMaster - Software Technology, Inc. (www.tabs3.com). The publishers of the venerable Tabs3 billing and accounting systems have something other case management publishers envy: a comprehensive marriage of case management, billing and accounting functions into a seamless integrated application. Married to the Tabs3 billing/accounting system, the two work as a single law office management system with tight integration of billing and accounting data to all the other information tracked by the practice.

ProLaw Ready – Thomson/Elite/ProLaw (www.prolaw.com). The latest effort from the company who coined the “Front Office, Back Office, One Office” concept is likely to be a significant participant in the smaller firm case management marketplace. Using a new lower cost pricing model that incorporates a per lawyer, per month fee for 36 months, incorporating web-based training and support, ProLaw Ready could be poised to do for smaller firms what it has so effectively accomplished for many mid-sized and larger firms.

Time Matters - Data.TXT, Inc. Cary, North Carolina (www.timematters.com). Time Matters continues to push the case management envelope with document and e-mail management capability, a web interface with the World Edition, new 3G high-speed cell phone remote web accessibility, and an “Enterprise Edition” for smaller firms that leverages the power of the free MSDE edition of Microsoft SQL Server (for up to 25 users). The biggest news from the Time Matters camp is the impending introduction of Billing Matters, a fully integrated legal billing application. with impressive customer support and a highly-trained network of certified consultants.

BOTTOM-LINE: case management systems have evolved into knowledge tracking, knowledge searching and knowledge management powerhouses. Lawyers in small, mid-size and large law practices would be seriously remiss if they didn’t implement these systems to drive their law practices forward.