Practice Management Software: A Law Firm Essential

By JoAnn L. Hathaway

Practice management software is a technology powerhouse that no law firm should be without. That said, many lawyers only have a vague understanding of what this software is and how valuable it can be to their clients and their firms.

Often referred to as front-office software, practice management software is a matter-centric application; everything related to a matter emanates from the information entered into the system. Many lawyers house their matters in popular red-rope folders, with manila folders inside segregating documents and pleadings by type. Think of practice management software as a red-rope folder in a computer. It provides digital access to this information (and much more) from one application, all in the blink of an eye.

Practice management software features

Matter management

The ability to manage matters centrally is the lifeblood of a law practice. Accordingly, practice management software stores information digitally in a central location. Many applications allow users to customize fields and content based on the information associated with any matter type. The ability to access relevant information from a screen or a few screens with the click of a button makes these applications crucial to a successful practice.

Shared calendaring and docketing management

Most lawyers would agree that firms are fraught with the need to capture dates, deadlines, and tasks. Practice management software allows users to capture pertinent dates and relate them to a matter. Users can create rules or apply predefined rules to be reminded of approaching deadlines or events. Since the software is shared, any number of individuals can be alerted about approaching deadlines. Additionally, if a task is not marked as "done," the date will continue to alert users assigned to the task that it is past due, as well as indicate the number of days past due.

Most practice management software features the ability to apply rules-based docketing. If a certain sequence of dates applies to a particular type of matter, users can enter a formula into the application to automatically generate important dates on the calendar once a base date is entered.

People management

Another powerful feature of practice management software is the ability to capture important information about a person or entity that may or may not be associated with a matter. As with the matter screen, many people management screens are customizable so that the information being captured is relevant to the entry. For example, if you were collecting contact information for a person who was an expert witness on a case, you might want to record the type of expert witness this person was, if he or she was credible, his or her hourly rate, and so on. These abilities and the ability to link contacts to a matter or numerous matters help make practice management software stand out from Outlook and similar programs.

Conflict checking

Most law firms lack databases capable of checking for conflicts, though best practice mandates should go far beyond checking for parties to a matter. Enter practice management software programs, many of which can conduct a global search. The ability to search for anyone or any entity from front office to back office (billing and accounting software) in a database helps ensure potential conflicts are brought to light for investigation and facilitates your due diligence before taking on a new matter.

Document management

Searching for documents can waste valuable time. Practice management software

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often includes document management features that require users to comply with a universal naming protocol, making naming subjectivity a thing of the past and allowing records to be quickly searched. Document version control is built into many of these applications.

Document automation

Lawyers are likely familiar with the repurposing of documents. It's a far-too-common practice and a disaster waiting to happen. Many practice management applications not only have built-in document automation functionality, but also synchronize with standalone applications such as HotDocs to produce an end product quickly and easily. Merge templates and other automating tasks make document production a robust feature of this software.

Research management

Capturing, sharing, saving, and repurposing research is another wonderful feature of practice management software. Conducting research in silos has long been the standard for law firms, and the result is the inability to communicate, share, and build on historical research. With practice management software, research can be saved, searched, updated, and shared with others in the firm.

Billing and accounting

Billing and accounting features of practice management software can be used separately or link to other billing and accounting software platforms. This standalone software, also referred to as back-office software, is best coupled with front-office software to produce a fully integrated product.

Picking the product that's right for you

There are many practice management software applications available in today's marketplace. Some are premise-based (you download and maintain it) and some are cloud-based. Most have general features suitable for any practice area.

Attorneys considering practice management software often ask for recommendations from their peers or technology consultants. With so many moving parts and variables associated with a law firm's needs and requirements, this question must be assessed on a case-by-case basis. The software that fits one firm might not necessarily be a good fit for another.

Knowing what practice management software can do is the key to beginning to assess the numerous options. Once potential purchasers sit through demonstrations by software vendors or consultants, they can begin to compare and contrast the functionality of each application and arm themselves with the knowledge needed to make a well-thought-out decision regarding which application is right for their firm. "Kicking the tires" of several applications before making a commitment is well worth the time and effort.

It's all about training

Purchasing practice management software isn't enough. Training is imperative. Many firms go cheap when it comes to training—a big mistake, because poor training leads to people not using the software. During the selection process, ask about training options and associated fees.

Some providers offer training through videos and webinars, while others have online or on-demand options. Some charge for these services, while others don't, and some have a mix of free and paid options. Some include training with the purchase of an annual maintenance plan, while others offer training through a certified consultant. Regardless of the training options, user training should be a part of any practice management software implementation plan.

For more information on practice management software, contact your state or local bar association's practice management advisor. A state-by-state directory of advisors is available at http://tinyurl.com/jbar9wr.

For a detailed chart on practice management and time and billing software, visit the ABA Legal Technology Resource Center website at http://tinyurl.com/hsbrkt3. ■

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