

Document Management Systems 101

By Paul Purdue

There is nothing worse than not being able to find the thing you need the moment you need it. A few weeks ago, I had to have my car towed. Just before the car was towed away, I went through my mental checklist to make sure I had everything I needed from the car. Satisfied, I signaled to the truck driver to take the car away.

The next morning when I searched for the headphones for my phone, I had that sudden feeling of panic when I realized my headphones were in the glove box of my car—the car that was towed the previous day. You know that feeling because you've likely experienced it when you've reached for your wallet and discovered it's not where it's supposed to be. From the moment you realize you don't know where your wallet is to the moment you find it, your mind is in overdrive as you frantically try to remember where it might be.

Lawyers are a lot like this when it comes to documents. They want to store their documents so they will always be able to find them later. They also experience those brief fits of panic when they cannot find the document they need. In fact, in their efforts to find what they need when they need it,

they end up making it more difficult to find a document.

A document management system eliminates the need to put your documents in a specific location in order to find them later, and offers a variety of ways to return to those documents. In the traditional folder-based approach, you must know where you put something in order to find it later. In a document management system, you “profile” a document the first time you save it and use that profile information to return to it.

A profile contains bits of information like name, client and matter IDs, date created and modified, document type (pleading, correspondence, discovery), author, typist, and document file format (PDF, Word, Excel). This information is collected when the document is saved and takes little additional time, if any, compared to the traditional method of drilling down to the right folder. In this process of saving a document, much of the information is prefilled or automatically stored for you.

When you want to find a specific document later, you can use any of the profile criteria to help locate it. You can start with a list of documents for a particular matter sorted by modified date. If that doesn't result in the document you're looking for, you can narrow the scope using keywords like “PDFs that are discovery documents” or “letters created by me,” for instance.

The *pièce de résistance*, however, is text searching. Maybe you're looking for a document you prepared years ago dealing with “chronic pulmonary back palpitations” (I made that up). You have *no* idea which client it was for, you can't pinpoint an exact date, and you don't even remember if it was a Word file or if the document was created before you switched from WordPerfect. The only thing you know is that the document includes the words *chronic*,

pulmonary, *back*, and *palpitations*. A document management system allows you to type these words into a search box and, seconds later, displays a list of documents containing those words.

The real value of a document management system becomes apparent when you realize the potential you have if you combine different search methods. A combined search would look something like this: Show me all the documents created by my paralegal or me after May 23, 2009, for Amalgamated Industries (regardless of matter) that include the words “pulmanative” and “fractation.”

The ability to pinpoint the documents you're looking for is what you're trying to achieve when you pigeonhole documents into specific folders using the traditional system most lawyers use today. The beauty of employing a document management system at your firm is eliminating the need to pigeonhole. Instead, you simply specify a few criteria when you save a document, and the system takes care of storing it appropriately.

There are two types of document management systems: those that are part of a practice management system (like PracticeMaster, Time Matters, and Amicus Attorney) and those dedicated solely to the task of managing your documents (like Worldox, iManage, and NetDocuments).

The dedicated systems usually incorporate more sophisticated features but also cost significantly more. The practice-management-based systems typically cost less and offer functionality a dedicated system would not offer, but their document management functionality is usually not as refined.

Which type of document management system should you choose? Though your current needs may change, don't even begin looking before clearly identifying what you need from a system. This will help with the decision-making process.

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In my experience, compliance plays a significant role in whether you choose a dedicated solution or a practice-management-based solution. All dedicated systems are able to “own the save.” This means that when you save a document—no matter where you are or how you trigger the save—the document management system pops up in place of the usual save dialog box and prompts you for a few details like name, document type, and client/matter.

The practice-management-based systems can take over the save in a few select programs like Word and Excel, but even then, they usually don't do a thorough job. Without the own-the-save functionality you get from a dedicated solution, you end up relying on staff to enter documents into the management system. The forced approach that dedicated systems employ eliminates the manual element.

While saving and finding documents are the two primary functions of a document management system, most systems offer additional valuable features that can be considered icing on the cake.

Versioning

Most systems offer some sort of version control, which allows you to save a new version of an existing document. When saving to a folder the old way, you must be careful when naming different versions of the same document so it will be obvious later that there are multiple versions grouped together. This is cumbersome and problematic.

In a document management system that employs versioning, a document and all its versions show up in search results as one document. The document displays with an indication of the number of versions, a way to open a version list, and the option to retrieve a specific version.

Document stamping

Document stamping creates those tiny, faint numbers you see in the corners of documents from other lawyers. These numbers represent the document's number, or ID, that was automatically assigned by the management system. This identifier allows

you to instantly locate a document in the system without knowing who created it or the associated client or matter. Of course, you can accomplish this with some fancy footwork in Word or WordPerfect without a document management system, but those programs don't automatically update when you use a document from one client as a starting point for a different client. In a document management system, the stamp is automatic (if you want it) and *always* correct.

Archiving

Many dedicated systems automate the archiving of documents for inactive matters. Other systems allow for manual management of the archives. Some offer both.

You can also find systems that incorporate management of a document retention policy, meaning they can handle a matter's document needs through three stages: active with documents searchable and readily available; inactive with documents searchable but stored in less-accessible areas with fewer frequent backups; and destroyed, in which documents become nonsearchable, inaccessible, and, well, gone.

Tracking

Many systems offer the ability to track not only documents but also who did what

with those documents and when. Sometimes called auditing, this feature allows you to see and search all sorts of actions: viewed, opened, saved, and edited, among others.

With auditing, you can determine who looks at which documents or which documents a specific person is working on, who deleted a specific document, and even how much time individuals spend on a document. Some firms use this information for billing, others to find missing documents that were deleted or put in the wrong place.

Regardless of which document management system you decide is right for your needs, you should know that many options will improve the intelligence infrastructure you employ in your office. A document management system has the ability to eliminate the panicked feeling of a misplaced wallet. Except for when you lose your wallet, of course. ■



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