

Software as a Service for the Legal Community

By Diane Ebersole

What is Software as a Service?

Software as a Service (SaaS) may be defined as a method of software deployment in which a software vendor provides subscription-based, web-hosted software. The software is hosted, updated, and maintained by the provider. Neither the software nor the data is loaded on the consumer's hardware. In plain English, the application lives on the web and you access it via the Internet.

What Are the Pros and Cons of a SaaS Application?

Think about any of the applications you currently use. You buy the application, install it, and use it, hopefully with no need for outside assistance. This scenario works really well if you are installing the application for the first time on a new computer. If you are upgrading your application, however, there are myriad potential problems: the application is complex, it integrates with several other systems on your computer, and receiving support can be difficult. Questions that come to mind include: Did you budget for upgrades? Is your current hardware capable of handling the demands of

the upgrades? Will you need an IT consultant to complete the process? What if your practice changes and you need remote access or you work from multiple locations or offices?

The easy answer to these questions is to buy the support you need to accomplish these goals. Hire an IT consultant to provide support. Buy new equipment and software to facilitate meeting your practice demands. Pay for software-specific support and future upgrades. Prepare to pay for the upgrades, support, and an IT consultant to assist with installation *again the following year* and you are good to go! Alternatively, you might explore a SaaS solution.

SaaS applications help eliminate the knowledge gap between developer and consumer because you don't install the application on your hardware. Your hardware replacement schedule can be determined by your best practices plan, not by the needs of an application that demands more RAM (random access memory) or a faster processor. Your software maintenance and upgrade expenses are reduced because your only responsibility is to provide Internet service and an up-to-date browser. The application upgrades are seamless and painless for the end user, but perhaps even more importantly, the upgrades are ongoing. You don't have to wait a year or for the next release for implementation of an upgrade. SaaS solutions are competitively priced with a subscription model that supports best budget practices.

What Are Some Considerations Before Jumping Aboard the SaaS Express?

Consider the following questions before proceeding with a SaaS solution: Are there options to work offline? What are the se-

curity measures in place (e.g., encryption, physical)? Can you export your data in a usable format quickly and easily? Are the backup and redundancy systems provided by the vendor adequate? Are data migration systems available?

If you remember stories about Red Gorrilla and its demise in 2001, you know that business continuity is a critical consideration. One measure of continuity is corporate maturity. How can you evaluate the corporate maturity of an entity whose services you want to purchase? One quick, unscientific method is the "freemium" test. You have likely been to websites that offer a free service and a higher level of service available for a premium—"freemium." Freemium status may be an indicator of the immaturity of the offering. The strategy is used to establish a customer base, get you hooked, and then zap you with the "pay or lose it" notification. Two recent examples of services that once fell into the freemium category are JOTT and MailItSafe. Both offered a free level and a premium level—but no longer. JOTT now offers a one-week free trial, and MailItSafe offers nothing for free.

Which SaaS Applications Might Benefit a Law Firm?

Here are a few "freemium" applications with law firm potential:

- **Remember the Milk**
<http://www.rememberthemilk.com/>
This "to-do list" application integrates with Google Calendar and can also be added to your iPhone.
- **ZoHo Writer**
<http://www.writer.zoho.com>
ZoHo is an easy online word processor. Use it to create and collaborate on your documents.

Law Practice Solutions is a regular feature brought to you by the Practice Management Resource Center (PMRC) of the State Bar of Michigan, featuring articles on practice and risk management for lawyers and their staff. For more resources offered by the PMRC, visit our website at <http://www.michbar.org/pmrc/content.cfm> or call our Helpline at (800) 341-9715 to speak with a practice management advisor.

—JoAnn Hathaway and Diane Ebersole,
Practice Management Advisors

- **ACROBAT.COM**

<http://www.acrobat.com>

Adobe ConnectNow lets you meet live over the web and share your screen with others.

- **4shared**

<http://www.4shared.com>

This site provides 5 GB (gigabytes) of free file sharing space.

Two very promising SaaS applications designed specifically for the legal market are Rocket Matter, <http://www.rocketmatter.com>, and CLIO, <http://www.goclio.com>. Both are practice management applications with many of the features of the better known products like Amicus, TABS 3 Practice Master, and TimeMatters. "Rocket Matter is a web-based, practice management and time & billing solution designed exclusively for the legal industry."¹ "Clio makes practice management easy with a full suite of tools targeted specifically at the needs of sole practitioners and small firms."² Both applications

are surprisingly robust and easy to learn, and provide a 30-day trial period. Your data may be downloaded from both applications in standard office-compatible formats.

If you are not currently using any practice management software, take some time to explore the potential of these two applications. Imagine being able to access your practice management data from anywhere you have access to the web, or even from your iPhone. You don't have to buy and install software, change your hardware, load it onto your server, or pay for the upgrade to the new version. I have had the opportunity to work in Rocket Matter and CLIO and have been impressed with the intuitive design, learning resources, and customer support service.³

While there is great potential for SaaS applications, proceed with caution, do your research, and don't put every office function into a SaaS application. Carefully take advantage of solutions that enhance your productivity, mobility, and flexibility. ■

Diane Ebersole is a practice management advisor for the State Bar Practice Management Resource Center (PMRC). The purpose of the PMRC is to help Bar members operate their law practices more efficiently and effectively by providing information, training, resources, and hands-on assistance through a broad-based clearinghouse, thereby enhancing their practice management skills. Ms. Ebersole has over 20 years of information technology experience at educational institutions and businesses.

FOOTNOTES

1. Rocket Matter: Online Legal Practice Management and Time & Billing Software <<http://www.rocketmatter.com>>. All websites cited in this article were accessed June 9, 2009.
2. CLIO: Online Legal Practice Management <<http://www.goclio.com>>.
3. To optimize the user experience and functionality of SaaS applications, it is important to have the most current version of your Internet browser (currently IE8, Firefox 3.0.10).