

Why the Right Document Management System is Vital to Your Firm

By Paul Purdue

With the number of files that even small law firms must manage, it's clear that a document management system (DMS) is central to legal work. Not only does a DMS allow firms to securely store and manage documents and data, it enables legal teams to be more productive and efficient. If your firm struggles to keep document organization consistent or is quickly outgrowing its current drive or cloud document storage system, you should take a serious look at implementing a DMS. From increasing flexibility to improving the firm's bottom line, there is so much a DMS can do for you.

A DMS is more than document storage; it provides tools to help you be more efficient and keep your information secure. A robust system can improve your organization's workflow processes, flexibility, and operational efficiency.

Storing your documents is *passive*. Document storage is a place to save files to retrieve later and potentially share with others. It's a virtual filing cabinet—nothing more, nothing less—whether it's your com-

puter's hard drive, a shared server drive at your office, or even cloud-based storage such as Dropbox and Google Drive. Nothing *happens* to these documents while they're in storage, and users can't do anything apart from viewing and editing them.

Managing your documents is *active*. A DMS provides tools to manage, organize, and make documents useful for the firm. It does what document storage cannot. You can see and recall each iteration of a document with view, restore, or compare capabilities. You can check documents in and out, keeping others from making changes simultaneously and creating conflicting versions of the same document. A robust DMS indexes every document and email stored within it, making all content immediately searchable. A powerful DMS can convert scanned documents or image-based PDF files to text-enabled documents.

But not just any DMS will work for your firm. You need a *legal* DMS, and here's why: Most DMS systems tend to be designed for the masses and miss the mark on the legal-specific functionality and security vital to your industry. Legal DMS systems are designed to meet the specific needs central to your business.

A legal DMS provides two fundamental capabilities. It's a central repository to store documents, email, and other content. It also provides tools for your firm to effectively manage documents and data (contracts, motions, emails, versions, etc.). A legal DMS also makes your firm scalable. As your firm grows, your client and case lists grow, and the content you are managing becomes larger and more unwieldy. A robust DMS ensures your firm can handle these increased demands as you grow. A legal DMS also handles your compliance and security needs because it's designed to monitor and conform to industry regulations and standards. It also adapts as these regulations change over time.

A legal DMS offers your firm:

- **Matter-centricity:** A matter-centric DMS allows users to create a matter, which is the virtual file cabinet to store (and manage) all related documents, email, and notes.
- **Email management:** In law, an email is a document like any other. A legal DMS can store, index, and manage email as it does documents. Of course, it's ideal to get a legal-centric DMS that integrates

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with MS Outlook so users can save email directly to its related matter.

- **Document types and tagging:** Law firms work with all kinds of documents—motions, orders, pleadings, complaints, contracts, and so on. By tagging documents, you can identify the exact type in your DMS, allowing users to quickly assess the type or nature of a document at a glance.

There are two types of legal DMS: on-premise and cloud software. Ultimately, the biggest difference is where the software lives. On-premise software is installed locally on your business's computers and servers, while cloud software is hosted on a vendor's server and accessed via web browsers or applications. You'll want to consider these options carefully because they impact security, compliance, mobility, internal costs, and productivity.

- **Security and compliance:** On-premise software manages your security and compliance demands in-house and is limited to the expertise of your firm's IT department. Cloud software places greater emphasis on security, compliance, and backups because it understands the strict standards of confidentiality that must be met. This helps your firm execute its security responsibilities by staying up to date with current regulations and pivoting quickly to protect against new security threats.
- **Mobility:** On-premise software requires users to connect to the office network directly or through a VPN. With the

cloud, users can access data from almost any internet-connected device. Attorneys can work remotely with ease, increase productivity, and provide better service to clients.

- **Costs and productivity:** With on-premise software, you still incur paper, printing, and storage costs, which can run a firm an average of \$50–\$75 per square foot. You will also have costs and time associated with the labor needed to file and store all of those documents. With the cloud, firms can reduce costs associated with physical document management like purchasing and maintaining hardware. Staff can quickly and effectively search for and retrieve the data they need. And IT needs are almost entirely managed by the cloud provider.

When choosing a DMS provider, you want to make an informed decision that you don't have to revisit 5–10 years down the line. Make sure any DMS you consider offers productivity tools essential to lawyers, management tools for quick information, security for documents, and collaboration and communication features.

Make sure you ask questions about the DMS *and* the DMS provider. Find out what tools the DMS integrates with and what security and compliance features the platform provides. Ask about mobility and the platform's ability to organize and search files. Does the platform support collaboration with internal and external stakeholders? What additional services can you add on? Ask the DMS provider how it handles the migration process. Review the provider's

cloud services agreement and ask to connect with other customers using the same DMS solution you're considering.

After you've selected the right DMS for your firm, you can help foster smooth implementation by getting buy-in from key decision-makers and users. Target the departments and individuals who will use the system the most and be most affected by the change. Take note of how you currently organize, share, or collaborate on documents and identify key problems to be fixed or optimized. Set reasonable deadlines to ensure the project remains on track. Communicate early and often by setting weekly meetings, sending emails, and hosting online trainings and webinars. Finally, stay positive. Changing habits isn't easy, but with the right system, the benefits far outweigh the growing pains.

Once your DMS is implemented, it's time to train your team. Find the people who will interact with it most often—these are your superusers. As you use the DMS, you'll quickly discover how it increases ease and efficiency both inside and outside the office. You'll find shortcuts and ways your DMS works with other software. As you discover all of the solutions your DMS can provide, you can optimize your system with ongoing staff training. You'll find the right legal DMS will pay for itself in convenience, compliance, security, and productivity. Don't waste time and money managing documents. Let a DMS handle this; you've got work to do. ■



Paul Purdue formed Attorney Computer Systems in 1980 with one mission: to help attorneys "Worry Less and Practice More." Today, Paul and his team do this by selling, implementing, and customizing the technology systems law firms use to run their practices and training their staff on this infrastructure. When Paul is not out saving the world from porous infrastructure, he is tinkering in the recording studio or spending time with his wife, Barb.