

Identifying the Best Practice Management Software

By Susan L. Traylor

“What is the best practice management software?”

In my extensive work advising on law office practice, there is no question that I am asked more frequently. As a practice management advisor for the State Bar of Arizona’s Law Office Management Assistance Program (LOMAP), I work with lawyers and their staff regarding systems and procedures to help them manage their day-to-day work.

There is a good reason LOMAP is interested in practice management software: it is a tool that, when used correctly, can help lawyers stay on top of many of the ethical rule requirements that head the list of most common bar charges—diligence, communications, fees, conflicts of interest, safekeeping of property, and trust accounts.

My typical response to that question is that I cannot tell you what the best practice management software is any more than I can tell you what house or car to buy for yourself. An unsatisfying answer, perhaps, but true: there are many factors to consider when selecting the software that is the best fit for you and your firm. If you have never used it, you’d better learn something about this legal-specific category of software.

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 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 JoAnn Hathaway, Practice Management Advisor.

Defining Practice Management Software

Historically referred to as case management software, practice management software (PMS) is a category designed specifically for the legal field. The primary distinction is that it is case-centric rather than contact-centric like much of the contact management software not specific to the legal profession that has flooded the market.

Lawyers work on cases (or matters or files). Although the client (a contact) may

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continue on for years, cases have a beginning, middle, and end. There are other contacts, communications, documents, due dates, appointments, and billable time, all related to the case.

Likewise, the lawyer may represent the same client for different cases, either simultaneously or sequentially, all of which have related or linked contacts, communications, documents, due dates, appointments, and billable time.

Examples of traditional case management software are Abacus Law, Amicus Attorney, Time Matters, Practice Master, Legal Files, Client Profiles, ProLaw, Perfect Office, Daylite (Mac), and Lawstream (Mac). For details on a variety of practice management software,

visit <http://www.azattorneymag-digital.com/azattorneymag/201110/#pg33>.

Two Parts of the Office

Two important concepts to understand are “front office” and “back office.”

If you think about the traditional law firm, the lawyers, paralegals, secretaries, and clerks handle people, phone calls, e-mail, document generation and management, date setting, appointments, and billable time tracking. These functions are referred to as front office.

Typically, the time, billing, and accounting functions (bills, expenses, payments, trust accounts, general firm accounting, and so forth) are handled by one or two staff members in the firm. These functions are referred to as back office.

Examples of back-office software for time, billing, and accounting functions are Lexis-Nexis PCLaw and Billing Matters, Juris, Abacus Accounting, Amicus Accounting, and QuickBooks Pro. Those that do time and billing include Tabs3 and Tabs3 Trust Accounting, TimeSlips, EasyTimeBill and EasyTrust, Amicus Premium Billing, Tussman, Bill4Time, and BillQuick. For details on a variety of time-billing and accounting software, visit <http://www.azattorneymag-digital.com/azattorneymag/201110/#pg39>.

As case management software grew in popularity, so did the demand for integration between front-office and back-office programs. As a result, front-office software developed links to back-office software. That way, staff members could continue using preferred back-office solutions and simply add front-office features, or vice versa.

Contact and case information is typically shared in both directions, whereas time records are unidirectional—once tracked in the

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front office, they are sent to the back office. Eventually, many front-office software developers created back-office software for seamless setup and integration. In some situations, the back office is built into the front office; in other cases, it is a separate program or module.

In summary, PMS today is most commonly used to describe front-office software with either a built-in back-office functionality or the ability to link or talk to software designed to handle back-office functions.

Traditional Solutions Meet Modern Trends

The PMS solutions discussed previously have been around for many years. These traditional solutions entail purchasing software and installing it on your firm's server or computers or both. You own the software and the data you input. You typically subscribe to an annual support plan with the vendor and pay for initial training and setup help. Depending on your needs and which product you purchase, your software may require routine customization and maintenance. The vendor will periodically announce upgrades, at which time you may consider whether one is necessary.

Within the past four years, several new PMS options have appeared on the market. These newer solutions take advantage of cloud-based technology (also known as SaaS, or Software-as-a-Service) where the vendor holds both the software and the data, and the client purchases a monthly subscription to use the software.

SaaS solutions are appealing because they don't require firms to invest in high-end servers or ongoing maintenance and upgrades. In addition, the software is acces-

sible from any location with Internet service, and many products have time, billing, and trust-accounting functions integrated with front-office functions.

Although SaaS solutions are ahead of traditional solutions in terms of mobility because of cloud-based access, some SaaS products are slow to develop document assembly and e-mail integration, features that are standard in traditional PMS.

Examples of SaaS or cloud-based practice management solutions are Clio, Rocket Matter, HoudiniEsq, LexisNexis Firm Manager, Abacus Sky, ProTempus, completeLaw Web, and LiviaLegal.

In an effort to compete with the attractive mobility functionality of cloud-based solutions, many traditional PMS developers have created features allowing users to access contacts, cases, appointments, to-do lists, timekeeping, and expenses from their smartphones. Among them are Amicus Mobile and LexisNexis Time Matters Mobility.

Practice-Specific Management Software

If you practice in a specific area of law, there is software designed specially for you. That is not to say generic, out-of-the-box software cannot be customized to accommodate a specific practice area; some products even offer practice-specific modules at an additional charge. It simply means that if you are practicing in only one specific area, it may be a good idea to research practice-specific software options first.

Keep in mind that some practice-specific solutions may not include all the basic features of traditional, out-of-the-box PMS. Examples of practice-specific software are ImmPro and LawLogix (immigration), Best-

Case (bankruptcy), Needles and TrialWorks (personal injury), Justware (public law), and Serengeti (corporate legal).

What Practice Management Software is Not

When the American Bar Association's Legal Technology Resource Center surveyed law firms regarding which PMS they used, a large percentage responded that they use Microsoft Outlook. Although Outlook may help lawyers manage their day-to-day schedules, deadlines, contacts, and e-mails, it does not fall under the category of PMS. It is contact-centric, not case-centric, software. One exception is an Outlook plug-in called Credenza, which adds case-centric functionality to Outlook. Credenza is a hybrid type of SaaS. You must subscribe to the software, which is added to your Outlook, but retain the active data in a file on your computer.

Many lawyers confuse PMS with document management software (DMS). In the quest to go paperless, many firms are looking for software to manage digital documents. But while many PMS solutions have DMS capability or the ability to link to DMS, most DMS does not have practice-management capabilities. So although your DMS solution may help you reach your goal of a paperless law office, it will not help you stay on top of ethical rules on diligence, communication, fees and time tracking, and conflicts of interest. Examples of document management software include Worldox, iManage/Autonomy, OpenText, and NetDocs.

There is yet another category of law-practice software called litigation support software, which is designed to manage litigation documents (e.g., evidence, depositions, and annotations). Though litigation support software may integrate with some PMS functions, it is more closely related to DMS and does not have the features of PMS. Examples of litigation support programs are Summation, Concordance, Sanction, Trial Director, Vision, and CaseMap.

Finally, PMS does not refer to Google apps or Microsoft Office 365. These may be attractive because they are free or inexpensive—and they do provide some basic recordkeeping functions such as calendaring,

documents, and communications and have some helpful features (like Google voice) for lawyers starting a practice or transitioning to a paperless office—but they are not designed specifically for law practice and would not be categorized as full-featured PMS.

How Do You Choose Practice Management Software That Fits?

Basic Features

If you really use your PMS, you will find that, like a house, you “live” in it every day. Just as you would expect a house to have basic features such as a kitchen, bathroom, bedroom, living room, and perhaps a dining room, you should expect any good PMS to have the following features: contacts, cases/matters/files, appointments, to-dos, automated calendaring, phone records, the ability to save incoming and outgoing e-mails and attachments, timekeeping, basic document assembly and management, and billing and accounting or a link to billing and accounting software.

Distinguishing Features

In addition to basic features, you may want a few bells and whistles such as particularly robust document management functionality; user-friendly features like automated calendaring, document assembly, or conflicts-of-interest detection; in-firm instant messaging; color-coded calendar entries; strong reporting capabilities; and the ability to create custom record types.

Integration with Billing/Accounting Software

Users of Timeslips, PCLaw, Juris, Tabs3, or QuickBooks Pro for back office may prefer not to change software. You would then need PMS that works nicely with that software.

Integration with Outlook, Novell, or Operating Systems such as Mac

Because smartphones, iPads, and tablets are a major driving force behind the move to go paperless and for increased mobility, this is one of the most important issues to consider when selecting a PMS solution for your practice.

Standout Features

One of the ways PMS solutions compete with one another is with standout features—one or more features that the other software developers do not have or do not do as well. For example: Abacus Law’s PDF Form Fill is a web-based intake form feature and has practice-specific Matter screens; Time Matters boasts tight integration with LexisNexis research and timetables for setting up frequently used deadline intervals; Amicus Attorney’s Library stores and organizes firm resources, phone records, and e-mail in its ComCenter; and ProLaw is integrated with Westlaw research.

Mobility

How do you want to work remotely with your PMS? Will it be installed at your office and require you to log in to access information, or are you a mobile lawyer who does not want to be restricted to a brick-and-mortar office? Will you use a virtual private network, GoToMyPC, or LogMeIn to access your computer when you’re out of the office, or do you have a branch office that needs to access the firm network? Does the PMS offer different remote-access options?

Style

Just as you may choose a house because you like the layout, the windows, or the yard, you may choose a PMS solution that is aesthetically pleasing. Remember, you will be living in your software every day. Understandably, if you are not accustomed to working in a database or PMS, you may need some initial training to become familiar with it, but you should get a good sense of your comfort level during a free demonstration. Consider the comfort levels of other staff members, too.

Training Support

Installation, implementation, and training are key to successfully using your software. With traditional PMS solutions, many vendors are transitioning to a fee schedule that includes annual support and, in fact, requires you to maintain that support annually. Typically, these vendors also provide many options for training (e.g., bundled

training sessions at the time of software purchase, web-based classes, local consultants who can come to your firm, or trainers sent to your office). Some vendors provide free webinar trainings.

What is the Best Practice Management Software?

In addition to being asked what the best practice management software is, I’m frequently approached by firms insisting that a product they currently use cannot perform a particular function, so they want to switch. More often than not, we discover that their software can perform that function. They simply did not know it.

There are many excellent PMS solutions on the market today. A lot of the success of a PMS solution depends on proper selection, installation, training, and implementation. Ultimately, the best PMS is the one that:

- Gets used
- Is used effectively by everyone in the firm
- Accomplishes the requisite tasks
- Works nicely with your other software and devices
- Stays competitive with technological developments
- Gives you a return on your investment
- Is there when you need it ■

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