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Document Automation PART II
– Keys to a successful Document Automation Project

If you consider the sheer volume of documentation that your law firm produces every day, developing templates for automating your law firm precedents may seem overwhelming. Too many practice areas and too many "types" of documents. Where should you start?

Here are some pointers to a successful Document Automation Project

(A) Decide on a suitable Pilot Project

Your aim is to establish a pilot project that is not too large in scope yet likely to yield the best results in terms of "turnover" in its production. An exercise in identifying the benefits that your firm will enjoy in automating its documents will point you in the direction of where to start - look at where the firm can benefit the most in the shortest amount of time it would take to get the precedent templates up and running. A common mistake is trying to automate the most complex documents first. These will take longer to code and likely to be used less frequently than the simpler documents.

(B) Appoint a "template development" Team

This team is responsible for "coding" the precedent templates; and should comprise – a Content Manager and a Template Developer.

<u>Content Manager</u>

The Content Manager's job is to give instructions to the Template Developer on the content; including variables, optional text and rules. During the coding process, questions will arise regarding the content of the documents to be coded. The Content Manager must be able to address these issues; establish variable-naming conventions and rules; make decisions on which documents should be "combined" in the template and the desired level of "intelligence" to be built in. The Content Manager is usually a lawyer or an experienced paralegal with in-depth working knowledge of the documents and they way they are used in practice.

<u>Template Developer</u>

The Template Developer may be an outsourced document automation specialist or a legal secretary trained to "code" your precedent templates using the specific document automation software you have purchased. It is important that your candidate has an understanding of the content and the end-result. Having provided technical training in Hotdocs Professional to a large number of trainees, it has been our experience that legal secretaries with good word processing skills, a logical mind and an aptitude for learning make the best candidates for this job. Expecting your IT personnel to undertake template development without an understanding of its contents is tantamount to expecting your IT staff to draft a legal document because it involves the use of a computer!

Vital to the success of your project is to give your team sufficient time and resources to dedicate to this task. Do not expect your Template Development Team to carry a full workload in addition to getting your law firm's Document Automation project off the ground in their "spare time" – its not going to happen! To get the most from your Developer, the key is the investment of comprehensive hands-on training in the use of the software; sufficient "learning" time while he/she familiarises herself with the documents; and uninterrupted time to code the documents thereafter.

<u>Outsourcing to the Professionals</u>

Document automation specialists are professionals who combine technical software skills with working understanding of the documents and the end-result. They can help you get your document automation project off the ground instantly by developing your "core" or first set of templates according to your specifications. With adequate training, your own in-house developer can then use these professionally customised templates as a base from which to develop other templates.

To Outsource or Go In-House?

Consider the availability of resources within your law firm and the real cost of training and deploying your in-house resources to the project. If you forsee a long term on-going document automation project, it will be more cost-effective to train and dedicate an in-house Developer to the project. Consider also that templates will need to be revised and updated to cater for changes in practice or statutory requirements.

For expediency and to facilitate the roll-out, most of our clients hire us to code one set of templates for a specific area of practice; while sending their most able staff for Template Developer training so that the firm is empowered to embark on their own template development project on other area of practice.

(C) Gather your Precedents

After you have appointed your team, gather as many precedents as you can, including actual client documents. By examining these, you will discern repeated revisions to boiler-plate clauses, lawyer-specific styles, client requirements, and variations to the standard. This will help you to consider possible variations to your "master" template. However, do not expect your Template to cater to all situations, or you might well find yourself spending far too much time over creating one "super intelligent" template. Exercise some discernment and discard concessions made for the "one-off" transactions tailored to client-specific requirements.

(D) Identify Variables & Input Optional Text

Variables must be named identically across the set of precedent templates if the same data is to be populate throughout the set (eg, Registered Proprietor's name must appear consistently across all the Land Titles Forms). Unless you establish a naming convention and a pre-established list of all variable names, you may well find your coding team merrily creating their own variable names that are different from each other.

Optional text refers to the "built-in" intelligence in your precedent template comprising a series of "IF" or True / False statements. The degree of intelligence in your templates depends on how complex your instructions are. You can build in as many "IF" statements as there factual situations that the template may conceivably be applied to; but remember to apply the cardinal rule - the more complex a template, more time will be spent testing it to ensure that it produces the correct result across all combinations of input from your user. Also the more time to spend building one "super intelligent" template, the less time you have for other documents and may eventually delay your project roll-out.

At the very outset, even before the Template Developer commences "coding" the templates, the variables, optional text and other intelligence in the precedent documents should have been identified and communicated to him / her. There is no right or wrong way to "mark-up" a document for automation. I have seen some of my clients use scribbled notes and arrows on hard copies to great effect. The most important thing is for the Content Manager to have reviewed ALL the relevant precedents thoroughly, establish the naming convention and communicate the required "intelligence" in the templates to the Developer. To facilitate this communication, I would also strongly recommend that the Content Manager familiarise himself with the software functions (and all its possibilities). This way, the Content Manager will be empowered to use appropriate terminology when giving instructions to the Template Developer on the precise desired effect (eg, prompts, repeats, dialogues, "if / else if" statements etc).

Developing your law firm precedents is an intensely collaborative effort between the Content Manager and Template Developer. The Content Manager should always be available to the Developer when questions arise during the development process. Clear lines of communication between the team may save a great deal of time and frustration later on in the testing and final roll-out.

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(E) Testing & Roll Out

After the first few Templates are ready, it is a good idea for the Content Manager to "test" them. This will allow the Content Manager to identify areas of miscommunication and catch any errors in the design of the "intelligence". Very often, template sets require the same variables and intelligence to be deployed across all the documents in the same set. Testing each template as you go along will facilitate "global" modifications or enhancements early on in the process.

The final phase before you roll-out is to test the entire set of templates. It is critical that the templates are fully tested for incorrect end-results or inconsistencies. Otherwise your end-users may find themselves wasting time correcting the merged document. Distrust in your templates is harder to overcome than initial unfamiliarity with a new technology tool.

Involve your Law Firm's IT personnel in establishing a proper testing environment; and ensure that they are able to provide support to your end-users after the roll-out. The IT department should know the proper location and file extensions of the Templates, Answer files (or database) and the merged documents; as well as have an understanding of the interaction of the document assembly tools with the current word processing software deployed in the law firm.

(F) End User Training

The importance of end-user training cannot be sufficiently emphasised. After an investment in time and money in a sophisticated document assembly system containing your own law firm precedent templates, you will want your documentation clerks to USE IT WELL. The best way to ensure this is to give them proper "hands on" training; so that they learn not only how to use the software but also change in business process that it entails - where their files are saved, how to make changes to the final documents, how to access the data files etc. Give them a sense of ownership in the project by establishing proper avenues for feedback on usability of the templates and the software.

Finally, expect your template development project to be an ongoing one. Templates need to be updated to keep up with changes in practice, statutory requirements or client driven demands. Feedback from the end-users is the most effective way to ensure that your templates evolve and continue to be relevant to the practice.

Bizibody Technology Pte Ltd are certified Hotdocs Resellers. We have rolled out a complete set of Automated Documents for Conveyancing Practice in Singapore using Hotdocs 6. We also provide Template Development Consulting & Services and Hotdocs Professional Training for Template Developers. Since the launch of Hotdocs in Singapor and Malaysia in 2003, we have empowered more than 18 law firms in document automation.

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