The Case for Case Management Software

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Case Management is the prevailing buzzword for law firm technology today, encompassing a plethora of office automation tools from calendaring to document assembly systems. In fact, a quick search on “case management software” under Office Management on Findlaw’s Tech Centre yields up no less than 32 different software applications; amongst these, there are several thoughtful, highly developed and well-supported applications offering varying approaches to suit different practice styles and budgets.

Despite the fact that case management software has been available for the last eight years, there are surprisingly few lawyers in Singapore who know what case management software can do for them. In this article, I will describe some of the features that have become the standard (and therefore the minimum requirement) of any case management software. I also hope to explore some of the barriers to its adoption that we have encountered during our IT consultancy.

What is Case Management?

Case management refers to the myriad procedural and administrative functions of a law practice such as scheduling appointments and deadlines, invoice and billing, contact management, customized reporting and most important of all, keeping track of all the paperwork related to the same matter. All of the procedures I have mentioned can be automated using case management software. In fact, once implemented, your case management software is likely to become the central hub of your operations; the source from which all the information you need for any specific matter, client, or personal calendar is drawn.

What can Case Management Software do?

Before you can decide whether or not case management is something that you need, you should know what it can do. Any quality case management software will have the following features -

<u>Schedules and Calendar functions</u> – Most case management software feature an appointments calender and to-do list in daily, weekly and monthly graphical views. All events and appointments can be sorted, filtered and searched. The system should allow specified users to have access to individual and group calendars for <u>Workgroup Scheduling</u>. The calendar features should also send you a<u>utomatic Alerts or Reminders</u> of specific events and matters requiring attention by a preset deadline.

<u>Automatic Task Generation</u> – this feature can generate a pre-set standard document template, open a specific file for review, and launch your email programme or web-browser (and for some, even make a phone call). Some applications have a <u>Trigger Function</u> for launching specific documents in your work processing applications or email programme or setting an event chain or date entry in your calendar. For instance, triggers could be set to notify your client when a court date is set down, to launch a follow-up action entry when a to-do list is marked as “done”, to send standard acknowledgement letters, or to archive a file when it is marked “close”

<u>Customise File Information</u> – this feature allows the same information relating to any specific case (eg, names of parties and contact details, case name and number etc)

or type of case (eg, debt recovery, trade mark registration, purchase of property..etc) to be instantly available in a drop down box or menu to save you time typing the same set of information over again. Most applications also comprise Document Assembly tools that will automatically generate a customised document from the preset data fields in the software.

Document Management – This function allows information from different sources and different file types (whether created in your word processing software, email message, attendance notes or scanned documents) to be organized into folders associated with the same matter; and instantly searched, retrieved and archived.
In a law practice where your work product is the delivery of knowledge, a system that facilitates the storage and retrieval of accumulated knowledge and enables it to be re-used and shared is of incalculable enduring benefits for the law firm.

Time & Billing – this feature allows you to track and record time spent on any matter. Most software facilitates easy integration of its time and billing programme with existing accounting software to speed up the billing process and eliminate the need to post manual entries.

Contacts Management – there is no better way to enhance client relationships than to permit your lawyers and staff to have access to a centralized contacts database where the history of your clients relationship with the firm is recorded. Case Management software can help you create and manage a contacts database, including the ability to perform conflict checks with accuracy. Setting up and maintaining a contacts database is the first step towards better client relationship management. After this you can use the software to implement the frills in your marketing strategy; such as automated greeting cards, offers to prepare a new will after your client has completed his purchase of new property; and generally to keep in touch with your clients.

Now that you understand what it can do – why are there not more law firms implementing case management systems? I will explore each of these impediments in turn -

1. It costs too much

Firstly, let me state that case management software available in the market today range in prices from a few hundred dollars to tens of thousands for a more complicated server-based application. Focusing on the cost of the software alone fails to consider the return from recovering lost or unproductive hours you could otherwise have spent in billable hours.

Simply consider, the number of minutes you spent today digging through the rubble on your desk looking for a specific document or your clients contact details or painstakingly filling in your time sheets at the end of each day; multiply that by the number of days you work in a year. Multiply that by your standard hourly billing rate… now consider the amount of unproductive hours you have spent translated into money terms!

2. It is too complicated

Product vendors and IT consultants will describe the software they are marketing in glorious detail, concentrating on the bells and whistles while giving you far more information than you can possibly take in at one demo.

As long as you can identify two or more administrative tasks that if automated (or eliminated!) will improve your efficiency (and reduce your frustration) substantially, focus on that need. After evaluating different product offerings, the case management software that you choose will be the one that meets your need directly. You do not need to learn how to accomplish everything that is possible with the software, nor the technical aspects of customization and integration with your existing systems.

The most popular case management applications in the market today are those developed with the needs of lawyers in mind and designed to mimic existing organizational methods generally implemented in most law offices. Although training is important so that you learn how to optimise the use of your software, you do not need to become a slave to the software in order to learn how to use it.

3. It does not meet my needs

In our IT Consultancy, we also discovered that some lawyers are under the impression that case management software is designed solely to manage the conduct of cases through a trial process. While the title "case" management does lend itself to the work of trial lawyers, most general applications are cutomisable to your specific work process; and are not designed for litigation cases only.

In fact, case management software today has evolved to such a degree that you can buy off-the-shelf applications designed for specific practice types or practice function (such as conveyancing practice or patent registrations to name a couple). Those with sophisticated collaborative and knowledge-sharing programmes are clearly designed with the large law firms in mind, while general applications built on modular systems may be more suitable for a smaller practice. Given the number in the market today, it will not be difficult to find one that suits your practice size and type.

4. It is not suitable for a small law office like mine.

Given that the organizational needs of a solo or small practice are not the same as those of a large firm, the benefits of a carefully chosen case management application are substantial where resources in terms of the lawyers own time and administrative support are limited. For example, case management software will enable you to automate higher volume, lower margin type of work, leaving you more time for legal research or for a round of golf with a valued client.

Also consider how you are reliant upon the secretary who "knows where everything is" amongst the clutter of paper on your desk. An utter dependence on her memory (or yours) is at best, uncertain, at worst, worrying. It is interesting to note how often a lawyer is motivated to consider case management software by the departure of a long time secretary!

While reasons for not implementing case management software may be valid, on closer examination, your objections may prove to be less than substantial. Case Management software is designed to make legal practice easier. We have described how it can save you time, reduce the opportunities for missed deadlines, help you organize and share knowledge, reduce your staff costs and improve your service to clients. Use it effectively and it will pay for itself over and over again. Law firms all over the world have been using off-the-shelf case management software in their law practice for the last eight years. Why not share the benefit of their experience? Read articles and product reviews by lawyers and consultants in the legal technology websites recommended by us in the Bizilaw Tech Centre; pick up an evaluation copy of market leading case management software such as TimeMatters, Amicus Attorney, ProLaw and AbacusLaw; or call us for a free consultation.