

The Next Big Thing....

Now that the Internet is accessible from every desktop and quick access through broadband cables have become widely available, the prevailing legal industry buzzword is the "extranet". Briefly, an extranet is a private, secure space on the web (which may be a website or part of a website) where access is restricted to designated users (who are likely to be your clients or lawyers and collaborative partners working in the same law firm or project. Another buzzword for an increasingly common extranet application is the "virtual deal room", a private secure space on the Internet where members exchange and collaborate on documentation and conduct meetings through video-conference.

High-end corporate transactional work today is likely to involve multi-national corporations with legal operations flung across several countries and specialist lawyers from different supporting law firms and jurisdictions. In today's complex commercial environments, collaboration is the key; and information technology has developed the means to facilitate faster decision-making, less duplication and increased productivity.

The development of Intranets / Extranets is a natural progression from the use of email as the preferred communication medium in the corporate world because of its speed of delivery, directness and convenience. The Internet is the best platform to support such complex interactions because Users access the information using a web browser, enabling corporations to deploy the application to all end users at relatively low cost. Combine this with the ability of the web browser interface to cross multiple operating and word processing platforms, and you have brought to the global business community new levels of collaborative capability hitherto unimagined.

Intranet / Extranet technology is now being used to create an online workplaces in which lawyers working in teams can collaborate on work in progress. Client access to online workplaces are usually in the form of a password restricted "member's only" area in the law firm's website or a private site to which only the parties involved in the transaction have access. The online workplace is likely to include an information databank or document repository containing all the relevant information related to the transaction (in a litigation matter, this can include the pleadings, statements of claim and affidavits filed in court, the instructing briefs, expert and witness statements; even information relating to the opposing counsel). Content on an extranet comprises the whole gamut of Internet technology available today, including graphics, bulletin boards, and streaming audio and video.

Richard Susskind, author of "Transforming the Law : Essays on Technology, Justice and the Legal Marketplace", predicts that any law firm that fails to provide clients with access to billing information, case status and related information via an extranet by year 2002 will be at a "considerable competitive disadvantage" when competing for corporate accounts. In fact, the use of extranets to deliver value added services to clients is no longer cutting-edge technology designed to fulfill a novel marketing objective but an essential communication and collaborative tool which is already becoming commonplace in larger law firms trying to keep their clients.

Clients like using Extranets because it saves them time and money. In a simple example, the distribution of documents in a commercial transaction involving multiple parties located in different countries is costly and time consuming. Corporate clients who wish to maximize the collective value of legal services

provided by their lawyers use Extranets to reduce duplicative work by different outside counsel and hopefully save costs. Better yet, an Extranet gives clients instant access to information about their cases without having to make a phone call or wait for the courier. Richard Susskind makes a cogent argument for the effectiveness of Extranets as a communication tool when he observes that clients rarely complain about the inadequacies of legal expertise from their lawyers but they frequently express concern over the mechanics of the working relationship; principally, at the poor levels of communication between themselves and their lawyers.

Building an Extranet

The key to building an extranet is to outsource it to the experts. You can custom-build your own law firm extranet with help from legal specific web developers or use a legal specific extranet provider like LegalAnywhere who offers a ready-to-use network kit comprising – document repository with search and sharing functions, bulletin board, conference room and a contacts database.

Generic workgroup collaboration tools, such as Microsoft's "Net Meeting" does not appear to be ready for deployment on an enterprise level as they are still experiencing problems in establishing stable communications links across multiple platforms. A number of vendors have developed collaboration tool "packages" such as LegalAnywhere; but few have come close to bringing together the full range of working tools – voice, chat, bulletin boards, white boards, discussion groups, collaborative browsing, online drafting, task tracking and management – that will be needed to make this emerging technology an every day working tool for law firms and law departments.

If you are building your own extranet, remember to keep it user friendly, quick to download and easy to maintain. By adopting a modular concept in your extranet development, you can outsource each module to specialist providers (a good example is Webex, a market leader for real time internet conferencing that is both reliable and relatively easy to implement); and re-deploy the same features for different clients' extranets depending on what's on their wish list.

Almost all market leading legal technology software developers are working on basic "web integration" – ie, developing front-end web interfaces and integrating their applications with web based technology; so that their users have access to the functionality and features of their applications through their browsers. Both Worldox and iManage, for example, have taken the first significant steps to ensure that their newest versions are "web-enabled". Middleware System's CONSERO is a collaborative browser based working environment in which the law firm and their clients share information including billing status, work in progress and documents. WEBDOCS, also developed by Middleware Systems, goes one step further by allowing lawyers and clients to distribute, assemble and collaborate on the assembly of documents from core templates in the firm's central database - over the Internet!