Document Management Systems: Why Bother and How to Shop for One (Part 2 of 2)

By John Heckman
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Have you ever made a mistake or forgotten about something? If so, it's likely that your firm's manual system for storing and retrieving documents has caused you headaches thanks to misplaced documents, missing documents, misnamed documents, and many other mis-takes so to speak. You may benefit from a document management system (aka enterprise content management system), but where do you start? Earlier this year, legal technology consultant John Heckman penned a 25 page treatise on document management systems (DMS) for law firms. We asked him to distill the key points into two TechnoFeature articles. In Part 1, John discussed the problems that a DMS addresses. In Part 2, you'll learn how to shop for and implement a DMS. This article contains 1,722 words.

INTRODUCTION

So you've bitten the bullet and decided to implement a document management system (DMS). Who are the players and what do you want them to do for you? There are four main options in the legal market: Worldox, Interwoven, OpenText, and NetDocuments.

Worldox has the largest installed base (although not necessarily the most seats as it tends to be focused in smaller and medium sized firms). It is centrally distinguished from other programs in that it does not use a SQL database, nor does it generally require a separate server over and above your file server. It is also priced lower than Interwoven or OpenText, so the overall installation and maintenance are likely to be 40-50% that of the other programs.

Interwoven focuses on larger firms and "universal search" functionality, together with a broader "content management." Although it touts its "Matter-Centric" focus, in fact this is something shared by all the DMS. Interwoven has recently been acquired by Autonomy, a British company in the content management space. The history of the software industry has not been kind to acquired companies, though it will no doubt take several years for any changes to play out.

Like Interwoven, OpenText (formerly Hummingbird/DocsOpen) has been downplaying document management as such in favor of broader "Enterprise Content Management" products. However, you can still get the base product if your needs do not require the broader functions.

NetDocuments, previously closely allied with LexisNexis, is the only purely Web-based document management system. Over the last several years it has evolved into a full-fledged document management system. You can set it up so that the "backup" resides on a local server in your office. This capability is a very effective means of protecting against Internet outages, ensuring up-time, etc.

WHAT FEATURES DO YOU NEED?

All the document management systems share a lot in common. They direct and organize the flow of your electronic information. You want to make all those pieces of paper that traditionally overflow your file cabinets available electronically and searchable in one place. This includes not only (and perhaps not even primarily) the documents you have generated, but all the emails relating to the matter (currently dispersed in multiple people's individual Outlook folders), scans, faxes, Web sites, etc. Some of this information may be collected in a practice management system, but the underlying documents are best saved and accessed in a DMS.

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A DMS provides a client/matter centric approach, organizing documents by client and matter (or project or whatever other term you use: the structure is the same). Any DMS also serves as a centralizing force, making sure that documents are stored logically and in the same way across the firm.

Finally, they prevent human error — you fill out a "profile" or information sheet, and the program takes care

of the rest. Documents and profiles are indexed, so that searches and retrieval are extremely rapid (i.e., one or two seconds across hundreds of thousands of documents). If you handle class action suits, you may want the ability to assign a single document to multiple matters without having to copy it over and over.

But aside from that basic functionality, what else do you need? In addition to word processing documents, there are three main functions that a DMS needs to accommodate: email, scanned documents, and saved Web pages. Many other functions exist. You may or may not decide to implement all of them, but it is important to know about the various capabilities.

EMAIL
Consider your workflow. You send and receive email both inside the firm and to the outside. Internal email to an associate/assistant often take the place of assignments in a practice management system. In addition, and perhaps even more importantly, you transmit documents to clients, co- or opposing counsel and receive back edited versions and/or comments. You need to be able to track this.

You send an email. You should have an option (or be required) to save the email to the DMS. There should be "exception" rules for personal or other non-business related email.

You receive an email. Depending on the program, if the sender's email is listed in a contact file list, you may have an option to save the email. Otherwise, you should be able to "drag and drop" incoming and/or existing email to a DMS folder that appears in Outlook. The

system should be smart enough to recognize that one email can have many CCs or multiple addressees, and save only one copy.

You send out an attachment, and receive back an edited version. Somehow, the DMS should recognize the attachment is a version of the original document you sent and save it as such.

Once the email is available from within the DMS, you should be able to reply to it, forward, etc. And of course all emails and their attachments should be fully text indexed in the system.

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SCANNING AND OCR
How well does the DMS integrate with your scanners? Most DMS rely on third-party scanners and OCR programs. How many extra steps will it take to find, review, and profile scanned images? Do you want to OCR just about everything (useful for searching and eDiscovery)? This is an area in which some third-party applications may be useful or necessary.

SECURITY
Your security options should be granular. You should be able to securitize individual documents for yourself or a definable group of people. You should be able to restrict access to various functions of

the DMS (many firms, for example, take away delete rights from all but administrators to prevent users (especially disgruntled employees) from deleting files. You should be able to restrict access to given clients and matters and set up an "ethical wall" to prevent conflict of interest issues in larger firms.

And of course, the DMS security should integrate with any Active Directory security you may have. Ideally, any security settings made in the DMS should be ported over to Active Directory.

AUDIT TRAIL
The DMS should audit just about everything that happens in your system: who has created, saved, modified, copied, printed, or emailed a document. You should then be able to generate a variety of reports on this activity.

FILES SAVED FROM THE WEB
You should be able to save files from the Web to the DMS for easy access. In addition, since many Web pages may not save entirely correctly, it would be desirable to also store a hyperlink to the Web page so that it can be easily accessed.

WEB ACCESS
While attorneys are often able to access their own desktops remotely, you may also need some form of Web access to your document store, particularly for clients (think extranet). In addition, you may want to access your document store from a PDA and download or email documents directly from the PDA, although this is likely to be an extra module.

TAKING DOCUMENTS WITH YOU
Let's say you want to take all the files for a given case with you on a CD,

laptop, etc. to court or simply to a client meeting. How easy is it to do so? Will you still have all the search capabilities of the main program?

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INTEGRATION WITH OTHER PROGRAMS
Aside from Microsoft Office or Word-Perfect Office, will the DMS integrate with other programs you use? How well? Most practice management programs, for example, have some form of integration with DMS, but frequently it is not very good.

What about specialized real estate or other legal-specific programs? Normally, these programs do not integrate directly, although the final output (a document) can be saved in the DMS.

Make a list of all the other programs you use and ask. If a program you use does not integrate with the proposed DMS out of the box, what will it take to make it integrate?

VERSION CONTROL
In a manual system, users save different versions under different names, leading to massive confusion. In a DMS, versions are saved in one place, but can have different descriptions (e.g. "version sent to client 2/5/09"). The different ver-sions can be listed, facilitating document comparison.

RECORDS MANAGEMENT
Records management functionality in most DMS is either fairly primitive or an added module. You should determine your needs, especially given that the cost of electronic storage space has become negligible.

WORKFLOW
Do you need a workflow/routing system to route documents for review/approval? Some of the "hybrid" DMS (Laserfiche, Document Locator, etc.) feature better workflow modules than the four DMS most law firms use.

EASE OF USE
Ease of use is subjective, but it's an important part of the package. After all, if you are going to oblige your users to function within the system, it should be easy to use.

How easy is it to view multiple documents in succession? Can you easily cut and paste or print from a viewer or do you have to open the document? How easy is it to copy a document to serve as the basis for a new document? If you repeat searches frequently can you save them? Can you split various windows (document list and viewer, for example) in the DMS across two screens?

Take a hard look at these issues. Make a list of pet peeves and a wish list. Don't be afraid to ask a prospective vendor "how would I ...?"

INDEXING AND EDISCOVERY
Like any other business, law firms should prepare for the possibility of a lawsuit.

A DMS that full-text indexes your entire document store can help you quickly find potential evidence. However, does your DMS index include .zip files or comments or track changes in a Word document, or hidden columns in a spreadsheet? Many DMS indexes don't include these items.

In addition, what about database or other files that are not indexed, starting with Outlook .pst files? It pays to look at indexing a little more closely.

CONCLUSION
Most DMS offer similar "basic functionality" and a variety of add-ons for functions such as Web access, email management, and workflow. Think carefully about your priorities and future needs. A good plan will shorten the time required to implement a DMS, reduce its cost, and maximize the productivity gains it delivers to your firm.

John Heckman has been assisting law firms with technology issues for over 25 years. Heckman Consulting is a software integration firm specializing in Amicus Attorney, PCLaw, Worldox document management, Time Matters, and other legal-specific software. It services the greater New York area and clients range from solo practitioners to AmLaw 100 firms. Check out John's blog or the Heckman Consulting Web site for newsletters, tips & tricks for specific programs, and other useful information.

Contact John:
heckman@heckmanco.com