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# Document Management Tips

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There are no hard and fast rules when implementing a document management system, although experience shows that some configurations tend to work better than others for most firms. Therefore I will focus on some general guidelines based on my experience as a consultant with document management systems.

## What Do You Want to Accomplish?

Most vendors focus on feature lists that promise to do just about everything except have coffee ready for you in the morning. Forget the feature list and focus on your wish list. To the extent a vendor's feature list does not match your wish list, consider a vendor that more closely matches your needs. One need that is frequently cited is to avoid losing documents (you would be surprised how often users simply drag entire directories from one place to another without even realizing it). Re-typing documents because the original file could not be found is not uncommon.

Do you want better search capabilities? Both speed and the ability to do boolean searches can be important here (find a and b; a within x words of b, etc.).

By integrating email into the document management system, all the firm's emails become searchable and you can easily locate all emails concerning a given matter, regardless of who sent or received them. Outlook cannot do this.

Do you want to be able to access your documents from home over the Web? Do you want to make specific documents of selected clients available to them, again, over the Web?

A critical issue is whether you want to "lock down" the system, that is, oblige everyone to use it all the time. Practice Management programs such as Time Matters or Amicus Attorney offer "document management" modules that are optional–users are not obliged to use them. In my experience, this is a recipe for disaster. If a system is optional, then some significant portion of your users are going to opt out of it some or all the time. And of course, just at the wrong time or with the wrong document. To have to depend on the good will and discipline of users when implementing any system is not a great idea.

In business, there is a principle that you never start negotiating from your fallback position. The same is true here. Start from your maximum wish list. You may not eventually want to devote the time and money to implementing all of it, some things on your wish list may not be realistic, but at least you won't be in a position of saying three months from now, "If only I had...."

In short, the list of what you want it to do mirrors your existing aggravations. Plus, the process of creating a wish list helps to focus your thinking and will improve the implementation.

## Plan, Plan, Plan

Once you have a list, how exactly do you want the system to work? Do different practice areas/departments require different settings or levels of security? It is important to look at this closely to distinguish between what a practice area or specific attorneys might think they want and what they actually need. Generally speaking from one to three profiles (containing basic information about the document) suffice to meet the needs of most firms. This is an area where most often "less is more."

You will likely want a different level of security for the Firm's Management Committee and/or administrative, human resources or financial personnel so that only authorized personnel have access to whole categories of documents. In specific cases very sensitive areas of a practice (trusts & estates; mergers & acquisitions) might need a "walled-off" area. There is a trade-off between security and convenience. If you lock a system down too much, it can have a serious effect on usability. You need to establish your comfort level here.

## Involve End Users; Set Expectations

If end users are taken by surprise when a system is rolled out, you could be in for a rocky implementation. In addition, Partners who are used to certain work habits (and don't want to "share" their documents) may have to modify them, so it is critical for Partners to "buy in" to document management. Users will have questions such as "what about my personal documents?" "I keep the partner's personal correspondence on my local hard drive, what will happen to that?" "I keep drafts on the hard drive and only put the final copy on the network." If these issues are not addressed before hand, you could have a revolt on your hands. The actual answer you give is less important than addressing the issue – and you may also be led to modify the structure of your system to accommodate certain concerns or requirements.

## Designing the System

Document management systems create "profiles" to facilitate organization and faster searching. These typically include Client, Matter, Document Type, Author and sometimes Typist in addition to the document description. You need to decide whether this is adequate or whether you have special needs. For example, a corporate legal department might want to also cate-

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# Doc Management *(Cont.)*

gorize documents by the state whose law governs the document, for example.

### Old ("Legacy") Documents

A major issue when implementing a document management system is what to do with your old documents. It is a safe bet most firms will never access up to 75-80% of the documents created before the document management system is implemented. I recommend setting up a "legacy" category for your old documents. Force users to move old files into the new system the first time they access them. This will be far less time-consuming (and hence less expensive) than trying to convert your old documents. However, if you are switching from one document management program to another, there may be conversion utilities available to convert your old information.

### Integration with Other Products

Make sure that the proposed document management program will integrate not only with Microsoft Office or WordPerfect products, but Acrobat, various scanning products, cost recovery modules such as eCopy or Equitrax or other specialized programs. If the program does not natively integrate, can integration be easily added (Worldox, for example, can be made to integrate with almost anything)? Most document management programs cannot integrate with database programs such as those commonly used for e.g., real estate closings, precisely because they are databases, not individual files.

### Integration with E-mail

Client-related e-mails sent or received by various people in the firm should be integrated into the document management system so that they are available to everyone working on a case. Outlook makes it difficult to accomplish this. You need to establish policies for how emails are stored in the document management system. You want to make it possible for people to exclude personal email, items from listservs or RSS feeds, spam, etc. You also need to decide how to deal with existing email stores.

### Working Off-line; Web Access

Virtually all attorneys these days work from home at least part of the time. What provisions will you make for attorneys to take copies of files home with them or access the document management system remotely from home? Most document management programs provide for some sort of Web access, usually as an add-on module. Since copies of files will be taken away from the firm, you also need to establish policies governing web access to your document store.

In many cases, it is also possible to set up remote access to restricted areas of your document store so that specified clients can access those documents (and *only* those documents) that the firm makes available to them.

### Briefbanks/Forms

Most firms do not take the time and effort to create brief banks and boilerplate documents. Instead, attorneys "recollect" a similar document that could be modified for a new case. This process is prone to error ("old" language overlooked and left in the document by mistake). And not only are memories faulty, but this process leaves the firm without "firm-standard" boilerplate for certain purposes. In addition, standard form documents can serve as a valuable resource in training new attorneys: "this is how we have resolved this issue in the past and here is why."

### Training

Most document management systems are sufficiently easy to use that many firms do not feel training is necessary. However, in the process of "hand crafting" ways to keep track of documents in the past, users will inevitably have created procedures for naming and storing documents that may have been useful to specific individual users, but are either not necessary, inefficient, or even counter-productive in the context of a document management system. In addition, most users do not get the most power out of the program's capabilities. As with any other program, adequate training can multiply the effectiveness of a document management system many times.

### Conclusion

Given the intrinsic problems in managing large numbers of documents, compounded by employee and attorney turnover, adopting a document management system is increasingly a vital necessity for most firms. Once you have decided on a system, the difference between a well-thought out and implemented system can be a make or break issue determining how effective and successful it actually is. ■

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