

Technology has been both a boon and bane for law firm attorneys and staff. Increasingly sophisticated software systems have made many law firm functions more efficient and effective, from managing court calendars to billing clients to improving case management: That's the good news. Yet that same technology also places new demands on lawyers and staff, requiring them to be skilled in knowledge management, systems integration and instant accessibility to information. No longer can attorneys and staff afford to operate independently, separate from what others in the firm are doing.

What is a legal professional to do, in order to ensure that there are no glitches between the various court calendars, docketing programs, e-billing systems, case management programs and the sundry other software programs that have become essential to managing a law firm? Is there a magic button that makes everything flow together? The answer is, "Not yet," but recent developments and new capabilities give today's attorneys and administrators some freedom when it comes to integrating the latest technology.

When it comes to docketing and calendaring, all those are especially true-attorneys and law firm administrators need to know of any changes or updates immediately; the calendaring system must mesh seamlessly with other software programs; and staff and attorneys must work together to ensure that nothing on the calendar is missed or mislabeled. According to the American Bar Association, calendar and deadline related errors are the leading cause of legal malpractice claims. Fortunately, there are now calendaring and docketing programs for firms of every size and technology budget, from solo practitioners to the AmLaw 50 firms.

When considering a calendaring program, as with any new software expenditure, law firms need to consider how well the different pieces will work together. Efficiencies can be increased if law firms ensure that calendaring software works with other programs, including:

Matter Management Software

Constantly inputting data for cases, clients and court dates into calendars and matter management systems is an invitation to error-not to mention the cause of many tedious hours for those who need to do the inputting. By integrating calendars and matter management systems, errors are reduced and efficiencies are increased.

E-Billing Software

Your calendaring program should be able to bill-back automatically to clients for searches and scheduling. It should also integrate with other e-billing programs, making the process simple and transparent for clients and law firms alike.

PDA's

Laptops, BlackBerries, pagers and the like have freed attorneys from the confines of their desks, allowing them to work from the office, home or the road. But getting all updates regarding client matters in real time can be a challenge. Changes and updates to cases must be transmitted immediately to every attorney and staff member involved in a case. Attorneys may have their own preferences when it comes to their PDA's, but each one must be able to communicate effectively with the systems others are using.

Shared Calendars

As with PDA's, law firm administrators and attorneys have their own preferences for calendaring systems-for court dates and otherwise--but those calendars must be able to work together, or those who have a need to know about a specific case or client may have outdated information or miss a key calendar change. Everyone at the firm must have a calendaring program that is flexible enough to work with all the others; the firm may even decide to mandate the particular type of calendar program, such as Outlook, that every attorney and staff member must use. The calendar should allow attorneys and staff to receive and view not just current court dates but key client information such as contact information. The calendaring software should also be able to allow attorneys and law firm administrators to view individual and firm calendars in different formats, including daily, weekly or monthly.

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No attorney goes to law school to spend most of his or her time running a law firm, and no administrator wants to get bogged down in inefficient systems and software programs. By leveraging advances in technology, law firms can use software applications to work together efficiently, seamlessly and effectively, and spend more time working with clients and practicing law rather than inputting and double-checking data.

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