

Emerging Trends in Law Firms - Harnessing the Information Pipeline

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"It is change, continuing change, inevitable change that is the dominant factor in society today." Asimov, Isaac. Asimov on Science Fiction 1981

Continuing change

It is truer today than it was in 1981, when Asimov said it. The landscape of the modern business world continues to be dynamic, with changes emanating from a variety of sources that include competitors, the marketplace, emerging technology, and escalating customer demands.

In the wake of these changes, law firm administrators are increasingly pressured to devise creative ways to work faster, cheaper, and smarter. Clients, responding to their own changes, are pushing their attorneys to deliver higher value in work and services, reduce costs, and use emerging technology more effectively. To attract and retain clients, professional and administrative staff must be better informed, produce more consistent work product, and manage their clients more closely. To accomplish this successfully demands that law firm staff have an easy and cost-effective means to tap into the firm's collective knowledge base or "information pipeline".

The Information Pipeline

The firm's information pipeline generally consists of internal and external data bases, client records, transactional work, documents, software applications, internet links, and internal information. The law firm administrator is traditionally the "go to" person for the information pipeline since most of its elements are under the administrator's purview. The challenge put forth to the administrator is to deliver that information in a way that will encourage buy-in and utilization, reinforce the culture of the firm, is not a burden to distribute or limit access, and that is cost effective. Fortunately, the evolution of the Internet has provided a solution – the corporate portal.

Portals – A Little History

Portals developed as a way to aggregate functionality on the Internet, providing a single, customizable "page" where users could access a variety of information and perform a number of functions. Internet portal pioneers such as Yahoo® and MSN® were meant for the general public and provided an interface to the Internet that was basically intended to make it easier to find things. That idea evolved into Intranets or corporate portals, which were private and designed to serve users within a specific organization, not only as an aggregator but also as a collaborative work platform. Corporate portals have distinct advantages that are still true today, but early efforts had disadvantages as well. On the plus side, they create efficiencies by giving workers a single "jumping-off" point for accessing databases (internal and outside), purpose-specific Internet sites, client records and documents, firm news and software links. They encourage standardization and cooperation, because they provide a uniform framework for the way legal work is done. And, by extending the corporate portal to include client-specific Extranets, they provide a collaborative means for attorneys to work together with their clients, thus binding clients more closely to the firm. A portal enables attorneys to work as teams, access content and related documents quickly, tie into client contact and financial information, and in general, keep users in touch with the collective knowledge base of the firm.

On the minus side, early corporate portals were designed and programmed from the ground up and tended to be a costly exercise in consulting time, design, and execution. Most enterprise-wide legal software

vendors such as document management, financial management and CRM did not provide standard methods for passing data into the portal and required integration to be developed across a range of applications and products, sometimes requiring alliances between competing vendors. These expensive considerations put corporate portals out of reach for all but the largest firms.

Today's Solution – Microsoft® SharePoint

2006 saw the acceptance of Microsoft® SharePoint in the law firm community. Since its release, SharePoint has been making inroads in the law firms' technology kitbag and is eating up market share in the legal sector. There are reasons for this. First, Microsoft® is widely accepted as a standard technology foundation in law firms. Second, the base version of SharePoint, Windows SharePoint Services or WSS, is free with the Windows operating system. Third, Microsoft® has made it easy for smaller firms to adopt SharePoint by making the development of a corporate portal relatively simple. With SharePoint, internal staff can create a meaningful site in minutes without the cumbersome technical processes required by early designers. Finally, SharePoint is easy to deploy, rich in support, and offers complete integration with Microsoft® Office 2003 and the store of data housed within the Windows environment (including most internal and external data sources in a typical law firm). With the release of Microsoft® Office SharePoint Server 2007 and Microsoft® Office 2007, it is expected that this growth trend will explode.

Why SharePoint?

First, SharePoint provides a framework for aggregating information for presentation and collaboration among users or teams. This framework can easily be tailored by law firm IT staff to fit the needs of the organization. As a common standard, SharePoint offers a simplicity that makes it attractive to IT staff, with its Microsoft® Office integration and out-of-the-box templates, which allow for easy creation of new pages with calendars, meeting managers, discussion forums, ready-to-use and custom built "Web parts"; shared documents and reports, and other collaboration features. As a Web-based tool, it is every MIS manager's dream with little local software installation required, other than the browser.

To capitalize on the trend, most enterprise-wide software vendors either have or are currently developing ways of aggregating data from their applications as Web parts for SharePoint. Many are also providing functionality in Windows.NET-based components, creating an integrated Web layer that serves both the portal and the application. Portal administrators can easily add these to their site and configure them to suit their needs. In short, Microsoft® SharePoint gives law firms a cost effective conduit to tap into their information pipeline, one that is easy to deploy and change, promotes teamwork and client loyalty, and creates a foundation for working faster and smarter. Adapting to change has never been easier.

About the Author

Marcy Fisher, Regional Sales Manager for RainMaker Software, Inc., has more than 25 years of law firm software experience, and has authored articles such as, "Are You Down with Your APP (Average Payables Period)?" and "How-To Mind Your ACP and Improve Cash Flow." RainMaker provides proven, practical, and progressive Financial Management and Practice Management software, along with Business Intelligence and Microsoft® SharePoint Portal Integration to mid-large sized law firms. Ms. Fisher can be reached at mfisher@rainmakerlegal.com or 716.542.5663.