

IT Challenges & Solutions

George Rogol, Regional Sales Manager, RainMaker Software, Inc.
www.rainmakerlegal.com

The mission of IT management professionals in today's law firms is simple and straight-forward; provide outstanding service to all areas of the firm, give attorneys, clerks and management everything they need, when they need it, and do all this while keeping costs and staff below what would be reasonable to meet the demands. In the face of what often seems like impossibly unrealistic challenges, it is encouraging to know that there are solutions available to make tasks less daunting, and bring some relief to stressed-out IT professionals. The solutions may require investments in newer technology, but, in many cases, the investments can generate a quick and sizable return that makes them more than worth the effort.

The Challenge: Disparate Systems

Many law firms (and even law firm software providers) have automated various functions over the years in a piece-meal fashion, with separate applications and associated separate databases dedicated to specific areas, such as time entry, collections, marketing, contact management and docketing. While these systems served a purpose and increased productivity when they were originally implemented, firms are finding this multitude of applications to be a growing liability. The liability of these systems arises from several areas. First, having multiple applications with multiple databases adds to the basic system maintenance and administrative workload that must be performed by someone, usually the already thinly-spread IT staff. Second, having separate databases for applications such as time entry or docketing, can lead to errors resulting from inconsistent data across systems and labor-intensive cross-functional reporting. Finally, many times these isolated applications are limited in functionality and reporting, which means the law firm cannot leverage the information fully, or expends far more time and labor to obtain the desired results than would be needed if a more capable system were in place.

The Solution: Integrated Systems

The newest generation of software for law firms incorporates multiple modules with high-content functionality across various functional areas. For example, in addition to the traditional core applications of billing and accounting, today's more advanced legal software offerings add sophisticated capabilities for time entry, automated accounts receivable management, docketing, marketing and other areas - all integrated into one system, and most importantly, one database within the billing and accounting system. This architecture delivers significant savings for the firm (not to mention the IT staff) by reducing the administrative overhead, minimizing the number of servers required, and centralizing and consolidating data. Because the individual modules are not disparate, but instead integrated into a single data store, the firm's various departments can leverage the data of the entire firm and operate as a more cohesive unit.

As an illustration, staff assigned to collections can have their work directed by, and integrated with, the client data residing and used in billing and accounting, without the need to perform data extractions and manually comb through receivables information. In this example, integrated functionality and data can deliver multiple benefits including improved cash flow, reduced labor costs, enhanced client relations and fewer IT support demands.

The Challenge: Increased Demand for Specialized Reporting

As the competitive pressures increase in the legal arena, many law firms are finding they need to run tighter ships and become more proactive about managing resources effectively, while understanding the factors driving profitability and monitoring and improving performance across the organization. To understand how the firm is faring across multiple dimensions, to identify the areas that need attention and to make informed

decisions, management increasingly requests reporting that can answer the questions they must deal with to be successful. In situations where the system in use does not provide users with the ability to create the reports themselves, they look to the IT department to deliver the needed reports, with a usual timeline of, "by end of business TODAY."

These demands for information can easily overwhelm many IT professionals and lead to frustration on the part of management when their needs for information go unmet. This situation frequently arises because firm data is spread across multiple databases, requiring ingenuity in figuring out where the needed data is located, and creativity in developing a suitable approach for pulling it all together. To compound the challenge, many older systems, even core billing and accounting systems, have databases or file structures that do not facilitate ease in report generation, or are so obscure that few, if any, tools are provided in the marketplace to assist in creating reports. The end result is that in many cases, IT professionals are forced to produce the reports the old-fashioned way, through laborious and costly "heads-down" coding.

The Solution: Consolidated Database and Business Intelligence Reporting Tools

As mentioned previously, an integrated system with multiple functional areas integrated into a single database can result in reduced overhead and improved processing within firms. Another value to firms with an integrated system is the consolidation of a large amount of data into a single database. While the "nirvana" of a single absolute database may never be achieved (there will likely always be highly specialized niches that require some separate solutions), today's more advanced legal software systems combine many functions that were once disparate systems into a single database. This advancement, combined with the plethora of advanced reporting tools available with today's latest technology, can provide a huge relief to the backlog of report requests piling up on the desks of IT professionals.

To begin with, a consolidated database delivers the obvious leap forward in reporting ease by bringing all or most of the data needed for reporting together into one area with one coherent structure. Determining where the needed data is located, how to get to it, and how to organize it is greatly simplified compared to the situation faced with multiple databases in multiple organizational formats. Also of great significance and value, is the fact that with widely adopted databases, such as Microsoft's® SQL Server, a great variety of tools are available that can deliver sizable improvements in productivity in the extraction and presentation of information. Examples of the newer technology to deliver information include a number of reporting tools, such as Crystal Reports, and Microsoft's® SQL Reporting Services. Digital Scorecards are a very useful way to deliver snapshots of important information automatically to decision-makers on an automated, continuous basis. Additionally, coming on the scene are tools such as Microsoft® Excel spreadsheets that can dynamically link to SQL Server databases and SharePoint or other portal reporting tools. Furthermore, a consolidated database provides the ability to deliver what has become termed "Business Intelligence Reporting" directly to end-users so they can create and produce their own reporting, with minimal assistance from IT staff. Business Intelligence reporting tools allow users to determine the rows and columns of data they need to analyze, along with criteria such as time periods, professionals or departments.

The Challenge: Administer a Growing Technology Infrastructure Without a Commensurate Increase in Staff

Many law firms over the years have accumulated more desktop computers, more servers and more applications, but have done just the opposite with the number of IT personnel within the firm. This poses a growing challenge to IT professionals to continue to deliver high-quality support to the firm, while also having a continuously growing workload. Again, newer technology provides some substantial advances to help in this area.

For example, installing a new version of software on the server also requires that all firm PCs which use that application also need to be visited by IT staff for software update installation. This can represent a tremendous number of expensive labor hours. Software based on newer technology, such as Microsoft® .NET, can automatically update firm PCs when new versions of the application are loaded on the server. Also, delivering critical functionality such as time entry and management reporting to large numbers of people in multiple remote locations via a Web browser can greatly reduce the demand for expensive network bandwidth or terminal server applications such as Citrix. On top of that, Web-based applications require no client software, other than a browser, which virtually every PC already has. Newer law firm software applications incorporate multiple modules into a single database. In addition to the valuable benefits that derive from

a single database, another important advantage is this approach reduces the number of computer servers required to rollout new functionality to the organization. Fewer servers translate into less administrative workload and can help considerably in stretching IT staff resources further.

Summary

The challenges faced by IT management professionals revolve around delivering on increased demands to enable the firm to be competitive and profitable and to continuously adapt to a changing business environment. New technology, such as practice management, financial management, business intelligence and SharePoint portal integration, is delivering the tools and capabilities to help IT management professionals meet these challenges. To keep up with, and surpass the competition, law firms need to make sure they have the proper technology framework in place upon which to build a successful future.

About the Author

George Rogol, Regional Sales Manager for RainMaker Software, Inc., has more than 20 years of experience helping organizations leverage technology to meet their challenges. RainMaker provides mid-to-large sized law firms with proven and practical Financial Management and Practice Management systems, along with Business Intelligence and SharePoint Portal Integration. Mr. Rogol can be reached at grogol@rainmakerlegal.com or 610.621.2953.