



Reducing IT Costs with .NET Technology

by Jim Hammond, president, RainMaker Software, Inc.
www.rainmakerlegal.com

Almost everyone has experienced it; the joy of installing new feature-packed software upgrades, the anticipation of installing it, the thrill of running it for the very first time, and the sinking realization that your brand-new software has somehow managed to break your existing software...and the printer, and the Internet connection and possibly even the kitchen sink. Welcome to DLL Hell.

IT costs in law firms are soaring and many of these expenses are attributed to maintaining, upgrading and troubleshooting software. Fortunately, one exciting new solution has entered the market; software built from scratch on the new Microsoft® .NET framework. Software built on .NET will operate more smoothly, be easier to install and maintain, offer information exchange previously not available and save the law firm money by requiring little or no additional investment.

So where is it and how can you get it ASAP? Be careful. Some vendors are simply adding a few peripheral features and re-labeling everything '.NET'. Others have re-written the entire system. A daunting task yes, but the benefits to the users will more than justify the effort.

Eliminate 'DLL Hell'

The problem: 'DLL Hell', the term for the unintended effects on a computer when something goes wrong as multiple applications attempt to share common files.

Microsoft®, in the early 1990's, recognized that both computer memory and computer hard disk space were limited and expensive. Even if you managed to load everything you wanted onto your hard disk, running multiple applications often brought the computer to a standstill and crashed it.

To solve the problem of limited memory and disk space, Microsoft® devised a clever way of sharing files between applications by writing information about these shared files to something called the registry. The registry is a database that every Windows-based machine uses to store information about itself.

Microsoft® made it very easy for programmers to create applications that shared files, either with other applications or with Windows itself. By default, individual software components are shared by multiple applications on the same machine. Microsoft® actually went so far as to make it difficult for programmers not to share files!

A typical example of DLL Hell is the component versioning problem, which occurs when new software overwrites a type of shared file called a DLL (Dynamic-Link Library) with a different version. The changed DLL creates a ripple effect that can make other programs or even the entire computer unstable. An application that, for example, expects to find version 3.0 of MyFile.dll instead discovers that version 3.0 has been overwritten by version 2.0. The application doesn't know what to do, so it

loses some of its functionality or crashes altogether. Worse, sometimes applications refuse to go down alone and will take down other applications or the entire system with them.

The solution: Microsoft® .NET technology. By using the Microsoft® .NET framework, side-by-side implementation of the common DLL's or COM items can gracefully coexist and run simultaneously on the same machine. Legal software developers embracing .NET no longer need to be concerned with backward compatibility because different applications can use different versions of a shared item. The application itself will understand what version of the shared item to use and where it is located.

Installation and Maintenance

The problem: The unending cycle and challenges of loading and reloading software on both servers and desktop PC's. Software vendors are always releasing new versions and updates.

So, you lock down your PC's to keep the user from installing non-approved software. However, now vendors of approved software cannot access the local Windows Registry nor write key files to various Windows directories. This requires an IT person with 'administrator' level security to revisit each workstation or change local user rights to grant them additional security just to receive periodic software updates.

The solution: Microsoft® .NET framework eliminates dependency on the Windows Registry making software installation, removal and updating much easier. The firm can deploy .NET software by copying program files over to the file server. This allows the desktop to automatically retrieve these files and update the local user. To remove the software, simply delete the files.

In Conclusion

The escalating costs associated with maintaining, upgrading and troubleshooting software can be reduced for law firms partnering with vendors who have incorporated new .NET technology. Software built on .NET will operate more smoothly, be easier to install and maintain and save the law firm money by requiring little or no additional investment. By partnering with a technology vendor that offers a re-written, not merely enhanced version of their product in the .NET framework, law firms can realize reductions in their IT costs.

About the Author

Jim Hammond, president of RainMaker Software Inc., has more than 25 years of law firm software experience. RainMaker provides mid-large law firms with the tools to analyze a firm's performance, improve the marketing and collections process, implement workflow to improve productivity and at the end of the day increase profits per partner. He can be reached at jhammond@rainmakerlegal.com.