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Paper Intake Forms Are 'So Yesterday'

Automating the File Opening Process — It's Easy

By Jim Hammond

Well it's about time. The days of filling out paper forms, and sending them through the office mail to only then have someone re-key them into a computer are gone. Double entry of information and paper forms are a waste of valuable time and money. Some law firms tend to be inefficient, thinking that a little inefficiency helps increase billable hours. We'll save that discussion for another time. Internal staff inefficiency is another story; this is hard cost, non-billable and is definitely money to a partner.

So What's The Problem?

The file opening process is still set in the dark ages, it's OK to laugh as you read this, we all used to do it this way. Here is a typical example:

Step #1. The assistant fills out a form, some firms have fancy boxes to check. The firm has probably graduated to a Word document that can be filled out electronically. The assistant e-mails, or worse, mails the form to a conflicts person, and prints a copy for the file.

Step #2. The conflicts person first prints out the form, then re-keys words directly from the intake form to the conflict software program in order to run a search. (*Warning: Please never indicate to your professional liability insurance carrier that the firm sends an e-mail around to the attorneys as an "electronic conflicts search". Results can be costly or devastating*). After running the search a report is printed and somehow finds its way back to the original attorney or someone to approve it. The manual intake form is somehow updated with an "approved conflict" search and the form goes to the next step. Unfortunately, most of the search words entered by the conflicts person will also be re-keyed later.

Step #3. In many firms, there is another series of steps, including adding related parties, opposing counsel, insurance claim numbers, task billing code sets, special billing rates, marketing mail list additions, attorney origination credits, referral information and so forth. Of course, we are still dealing with an iteration of the original paper form with a few additional pages.

Step #4. We'll just stop here, because in most firms we are now in the accounting department where all this information is now finally entered at least once more into an accounting system. As the accounting staff will tell you, they end up with all the "junk"; the assistant never provided the fax number, no e-mail address for the billing contact, etc. Finally, we have a new file "sort of opened", and we'll need to also manually write in the new client/matter number on the original paper intake sheet and mail it back to the original assistant so that work can begin on the matter. By the way, all of this data has to magically find its way to the documents management system, Outlook e-mail address books, equitrac-type systems, and a few dozen other places. Multiple data entry of the same information.

I know; I can't believe it either. You actually do this for every file, every day and think that there is no problem. Furthermore, at any given time there is also no management of the individual process — much less firm-wide management — of the entire process. Let's not bring up the issues of delays, wrong information and irritated clients. The current way is "so yesterday".

Why Didn't We Automate This Before?

Quite simply, there was no affordable way to accomplish this task — no vendors and no viable technology; only the big companies did it. We have all heard the horror stories of some larger firm that hired consultants, bought workflow servers and spent huge dollars custom programming some generic workflow software to help fill in the "now computer version of the paper form." No sooner was the project completed, then the firm wanted to modify the workflow a tiny bit and had to bring the programmers back in. After a few of these stories, I'd be real happy to stay with my paper forms too.

So What's Changed?

Well, sooner or later vendors do a better job of listening and find ways to make even the most difficult tasks easy to do, at a low cost and without extra consultants and programmers. It always seems to happen — sometimes it just takes awhile. Today, workflow can be incorporated seamlessly into standard products, on-screen data entry forms are easy for a firm to design, and you can tailor products to fit your ever-changing needs. The price is affordable and the benefits are enormous. Best of all, at the end of the workflow process all the data is immediately available in your different software systems, Time and Billing, Outlook Contacts, Marketing, Collections, Docketing, Case Management, etc. You only enter information once — it's like a dream come true.

So How Does It Work? The Simple Explanation

Start by thinking through how you do it now. Maybe you should design your first workflow to just follow these same steps. You can always tweak the process later. Electronic New Matter Intake is quite simple to get started. Each "step" below will become its own Web screen automatically in the system.

1. On a set-up screen, just label each step; you can have as many or as few as you need.

a) Start Screen
b) Conflict Search
c) Approve Rates and Attorney Information
d) Assign Client/Matter Number
e) Marketing
f) Records Department — Final Step

2. In a screen design program, just drag and drop the groups of data entry fields from a list onto you your design screen. It is simple to drag them across the screen and line them up with all the grid lines so it looks nice and neat. For example, on the Start Screen we'll probably just use fields for client name, matter description, billing contact, address information, choose a billing attorney, pick an area of law and so forth. This way the firm will end up with custom designed screens with data entered in the order you like. We all have different needs. We'll probably add the firm logo to the screens just to jazz it up a little. At the end of the design process for each

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screen just click on the "preview" button and the program will provide an exact preview of your new browser screen in Microsoft Internet Explorer. If it looks pretty good, just click the "finalize" button to save all this work and move on. It's OK, you can always come back and redesign it any time you want, no problem.

3. The final step is to go to the last sset-up screen and answer some questions for all the screens you just designed. Here are some examples:

a) When an assistant finishes with the Start Screen, who should get the e-mail Web link asking them to run a conflict search? Just pick from a list of names, types of people or an internal Outlook e-mail distribution lists, *ie*, Conflicts Department.

b) How much time is an assistant allowed to take (business minutes, hours, or days) before the system sends a delay notification e-mail to a person or group indicating that the process is delayed?

c) If the conflict is approved, who should get the next e-mail link? Should an e-mail be sent for actual conflict approval, and can it be approved from within the Outlook e-mail message (approval or decline button)? d) Should courtesy e-mails be sent out at each step to keep people up to date on the progress of the process? Should these be consolidated and sent every X hours or should each event send its own courtesy e-mail immediately?

Sure there are a few questions and selections from a list of options, but this totally eliminates the programmers and allows you the ability to change the options at any time.

4. You are now ready to let a few assistants start using the Electronic New Matter Intake system. Don't worry since it is a browser-based system you won't have any software to load on the desktop. Chances are, they will adopt it immediately because they already know how to fill out the existing forms. Here they can save keystrokes since a lot of what they now manually type is just a look-up box. For example, look up an existing client if you just want to add a matter. It will easily default the current contact, address and billing information if you want. The assistants already like it.

5. Since you are the manager, you get to look at the firm-wide Control Screen and see all currently active New Intakes, what step they are currently in, which are in delay status, and which have been completed or declined. If you have multiple offices and departments you can easily filter the Control Screen to just review these.

Conclusion

Today it is possible to save time and money, get a substantial improvement in productivity, quality and control by implementing one of the newest forms workflow. It just makes sense and it's now affordable. See, if law firms complain enough, somebody really will listen.

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Only For Techies – Those That Will Choose the Advanced Options

OK, now we can talk to the people who like the techie stuff, those that want to take it to the next level, the really cool features. They want more than the "simple explanation," they'll choose all the advanced options.

Electronic New Matter Intake will probably be the first implementation within the firm of Business Activity Management (BAM). BAM will facilitate faster response time to attorneys and clients, lower costs and insure quality and accuracy. It will allow the firm to set standards of performance for key functions, the internal flow of information and then measure and manage to those set of standards. Firms can set baselines of expected performance and then allow the system to monitor actual conformance to the requirements. Using BAM, an Executive Director at a law firm is like an air traffic controller watching a radar screen and controlling the air space — careful planning, and constant feedback assures no delays or mishaps. Without radar, mishaps would be discovered, not prevented.

SmartAlert type e-mails provide the most graceful way of routing and approving workflow processes. The workflow system sends an e-mail to a person with instructions to complete a specific task. With today's Web-based technology, this can include a hot link directly to a task screen within the workflow product. An e-mail can also include fields for data entry or approval. So, for example, an attorney can approve a conflicts search within an Outlook e-mail message. The workflow system monitors the time it takes to complete a task, thereby managing the business activity.

The firm has defined the process of completing a "step" of electronic data entry for a new case intake form, allowing the user 2 "business hours" to complete the task. If the process takes more than 2 hours, a manager is notified of the delay by another SmartAlert e-mail explaining the situation. The e-mail can indicate the actual user entering the information, the start time, the expected completion time and the current status of the process. Since the process is critical to the firm, a manager may easily route the task to another user, or make other decisions. With BAM there is a built-in audit trail that time and date stamps all processes; a permanent record of what has transpired.

Many times a firm will set up the workflow system to broadcast courtesy e-mails that notify the attorneys or staff when various events have taken place. No action is required with a courtesy e-mail. For example, in our new matter intake process, the originating attorney may want a courtesy notification when a conflict search has been approved. Assistants who start the intake process like to know that it has completed all the required steps, a client matter number has been assigned and work can begin on the engagement. Attorneys like the feature that provides a consolidated daily or weekly recap of all new clients or matters approved or declined within the firm, or maybe just in their department. In this case, the SmartAlert is a consolidated report type e-mail that shows the business activity.

The backbone of the workflow process is the workflow engine. This engine can be configured to accomplish the intelligent e-mail notifications, decide what happens upon approval or decline and provide a security model identifying roles for viewing, editing information. In the workflow set-up it is easy to identify variations in the flow. For example, can a manager by-pass certain steps and immediately assign the client/matter number thereby finalizing the process, or maybe a unique routing is necessary to a committee for approval of non-standard rates.

Since the design of data input functions today favors browser based architecture, the Matter Intake system needs to use this technology. A browser based system benefits the firm by making it easy to install, just send a link to a user. Since the firm is likely to change screen designs frequently as they experiment new software never has to be updated on user PC's. These applications are also easily deployed to remote offices and they are much friendlier on firm-wide WAN connections than client/server applications. Firms can decide whether they will permit this application to reside outside the firewall and be accessible for traveling attorneys or just contained within the building. In any case the browser is the best tool.

— Jim Hammond