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How Do You Know What to Automate At Your Law Firm?

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Over the past few years, automation and technological advancements have been making headlines. Publications from the National Law Review regarding lawyers' ethical obligation to technology, to articles from Above The Law about how technology can make you a better lawyer, there is no escaping it! Even the New York Times has contributed their thoughts on A.I. and its impacts on our industry. The news of legal technology and its prevalence throughout the industry is becoming more and more ubiquitous every year and there's a reason why.

Hesitant eyebrows have been raised surrounding automation and A.I., but the consensus remains that human experience is what clients are looking for and willing to pay for. However, what they do not want to pay for is the routine and administrative work.

So with this in mind, how can you eliminate the need to bill clients at a high rate for routine work? Is it even possible? Let's find out.

23% of a lawyer's job can be automated with existing technology. So let's think about this... if you're not automating almost ? of your workload right now, you may have some work to do. Throughout this blog, we will be discussing some ideas and tools that will allow you to assess what you're doing with your practice and how you can get better and be more efficient.

Automation and Productivity go hand-in-hand. What this means is there will still be a human element to everything we discuss. So while some of the aspects of what we go over today might not be true automation, they will without question speed up your processes and enable you to deliver on your client's expectations. You are also giving yourself a competitive advantage and in fact, most clients today will demand that their lawyers practice efficiently. On the flip side, if they are not demanding this level of efficiency, this could be a great opportunity to market your service and differentiate yourself. The idea is to allocate the most amount of your time to the tasks that only you, the attorney, can complete. At the end of the day, your job is to use the law to bring a successful outcome for your clients, however, that work is dependent on the backend business and administrative tasks that have to be taken care of.

Getting Things Done

Attorneys time is their most important asset. It's what they use and it's what they bill for. Anything they can do to take that time, preserve it, and use it effectively, and furthermore bill for it, is going to go a long way in making their firm more efficient, more profitable.

When you think about getting things done, what you should be doing is finding ways to make the mundane or repetitive tasks, be it emails or document creation, and simplify or automate them so they take less of your time.

How Do You Know What to Automate?

Technology is in no doubt becoming more and more pervasive, and in many cases, it can be overwhelming. It is important to be able to discern what you do and don't need and educate yourself on all the resources and advancements out there, because as they say, you don't know what you don't know.

To help you with this process, start keeping a log of your firm's daily activities for one week. This can be done by you, or a paralegal, or any associate you may have. Ideally, it is best to have everyone participate and take note of what they do during the week. This should include everything from standing at the printer making copies, stuffing envelopes, and sticking stamps on, to going back and forth with a client about scheduling a meeting. Everything you do, big or small, should be logged.

Once you have recorded all those activities, you organize them into areas of work. Areas of work simply mean categories that you can compile each of your recorded tasks into. Then, address each area of work with ideas of improved processes. So if you notice in each area you're creating the same document 5 times in a week, or you're spending 20% of your week scheduling phone calls, you may have just identified an area that can benefit from an improved process or automation.

Your next step should be to research technology tools that may ease the administrative burden of each area of work. There are a ton of tools out there that you can evaluate and see if they could be good solutions for your firm. If you need a place to start, check out our Legal Tech Buyers Guide!

While you do this preliminary research, you should consider the costs associated and decide how many resources you're willing to allocate to improve the areas you've identified. Those resources encompass the capital, manpower, and time you have available to spend researching and investing in tools.

The last step is to set realistic goals for implementation and give each project an owner and a deadline.

Going through this process will help you identify tasks and areas within your firm that you can automate. Improved processes in your firm really do mean more profitability at the end of the day. Not to mention more peace of mind. Work-life balance is crucial and having the ability to get back the wasted time from daily monotonous tasks is the best place to start.

Areas You Can Easily Automate

Let's dive into some of the most easily automated areas within your firm and discuss what processes you could put in place to make each of these categories more manageable and efficient.

Document Generation

Beyond basic drafting, document generation takes up a large part of most law practices. Hopefully, you have already started to build a document database for your practice where you have quick and easy access to commonly used templates. These templates could consist of letters to opposing counsel, intake forms, contracts, estate planning documents, you name it.

Consider the things you do repeatedly, the documents you're touching all the time like pleadings, collection letters, and letters to clients. Think about what you're using most often and why you're using it so frequently. Another thing to think about are commonalities, things you're doing over and over again, or bits of information that you're repeatedly using. Begin gathering these things electronically in word documents or notes, and file them accordingly into folders that your staff can access. These files should denote to your team which documents your firm could benefit from if they were automated.

For documents specifically, one of the huge benefits of automation that is definitely worth mentioning is that this streamlined process helps eliminate human errors. Human errors happen, but in your line of work, it is crucial that they are made very infrequently. Automation removes typos and it eliminates missed elements or pieces of a document that you may have merged into another. These mistakes reflect poorly on you and your firm, and if you're on the receiving end of a document that has the wrong party name on it, you know that someone was not thinking very clearly or proofreading. These simple mistakes can be the difference between a client staying with your firm or moving over to a competitor.

Now, in some cloud-based systems, you can open and save documents directly in your software from within Microsoft Word and create document templates by merging information stored within your matters. To go even one step further, some platforms even allow you to create time entries in Word as you're working on documents. So not only can you more effectively manage and log your time, you can do it all concurrently without having to create make a mental note to record your time later on in the week.

Checklists and Workflows

Do you have a checklist to maintain the organization of your matters or a systematic process that you use to move through new client intake? If the answer is yes, then keep reading because we're about to go through some tips as to how you can tackle streamlining and automating your checklists.

Gather your paper checklists, or if you don't have any, think of case types that you handle often and think about everything you need to do to bring a case to a certain point. This could be every checkpoint, every due date, or every reminder needed to propel your work forward. These steps are right for automation, why? Because it is a repeated process. It is a process that you work through for every matter and for every client that walks through your door.

Once you have this in place, standardize the data fields and each step you take to bring each matter to a successful conclusion. What do those steps look like for your firm? What are you going to call them? Standardizing your data fields are important because in order to pull in data from your matters into your documents (like discussed in the previous section) you have to have a uniform way of identifying what you want to be merged and auto-populated and what you do not.

Some case management software on the market today will allow you to automate your checklists and create workflows for calendaring, tasks, and matter templates (to name a few). For example, you can build your case flow directly into your case management system and automatically assign or complete tasks for you. Keeping information on a matter up to date is a lot of work, but you can keep matters updated with a workflow system that automatically updates information for your team, freeing up your staff for billable activities. Not to mention, you can keep your clients in the loop by automatically sending update emails to your client as a matter reaches different stages.

Today’s modern software and technology have really revolutionized the way firms practice. It’s because of this continual innovation and sustained progression that we are able to see the transformation of how the best attorneys in the world capture more billable time. And for those people who are wary of technology, don’t view it as an unconquerable behemoth, view simply as a way to help your firm make more money.

Billing Procedures

What are some ways you can think about tightening up your billing processes and automating them?

Let’s do a little exercise…

Consider optimizing your billing if any of these subsequent points ring true to you:

- You spend more than a few days getting your monthly billing in order
- You have to piece together your billing at the end of the month
- You don’t bill as you work or you don’t keep track of time as you go
- You currently use snail mail to send out your bills
- You have ever sent out an inaccurate invoice
- You have clients who pay you the same amount every month (think retainers or flat fees)

Automate and Optimize Your Billing

Use your time and billing software to its fullest potential.

What does that mean exactly?

If you have a standard rate that you use no matter what that’s fine! You can still use your billing software to send out all of your bills expeditiously. However, if you’re in a situation where you bill different clients at different rates or different matters for the same client at different rates, things get a little more complicated. In these instances, it will be significantly harder to keep track of if you're accurately billing each client.

Your practice management software makes it so much easier for you to plug in those billing rates when they become effective. By doing this you open the door to batch billing which will significantly speed up the rate at which you get bills out the door. Batch billing will allow you to run all your invoices at once, not to mention you can set qualifications on any open matter that is above a certain dollar amount for a specific time period (since you last ran bills) and will allow you to create invoices for them.

And if you’re not billing as you work you should be. And what we mean by that is if you’re not assigning time to everything you do, whether it’s sending client emails, or working on documents, you’re losing money. Some software will give you the ability to run timers while you work. So you don’t have to worry about tracking your time, it will automatically be captured for you and go straight back to that matter.

A big bear for firms is the pre-bill approval process. In many cases, this is the step that significantly decreases efficiency and timeliness. What happens is firm admins or the billing team print a zillion copies of every bill, distribute them to timekeepers, and wait for them to be edited. Once they're returned (which sometimes takes longer than anticipated), those notes, sometimes legible, sometimes not, have to be retyped and saved as a new bill before getting the final stamp of approval to disperse to clients. Clients or more willing to pay while they feel like their matter is still being worked on. The longer you wait, the more time and distance the client puts between the work you did for them and the close of their case. The solution to this? Get your pre-bill process done faster! And how do you do this? Through solutions like ePre-bill that let you electronically edit a pre-bill! A solution like this will let you flow a bill up a chain of approval, see all previous markups, and get insight into all the previous changes. If you want to keep printing bills that is fine! But now you have an option not to that will save you more time and get you paid faster. That is the beauty of automation and technology!

Ultimately, the goal is to avoid having to piece together everything you've done over the course of the month because you have utilized technology that has kept track of it for you.

Let's look at a different example... if you are dealing with a client who pays you a $2,000 retainer every month for access to your services for 10 hours a month, you can set that up so your client is automatically receiving that bill or auto drafting from their account at the end of every month. Setting up this consistency will create a level of expectancy from your client, trust, and reliability. Now, what if you have clients that say hey, I can't pay this entire invoice right now, I can pay you incrementally over time. Normally, you would have to remember every month that your client promised you a reduced amount, but with payment plans, you can set that up automatically to send the new invoice with designated payment reminders until that bill is paid off.

These are just two examples of how you can utilize automated billing, the possibilities are endless. If you're curious to read more, check out: Staying Ahead of the Curve: Bolstering Efficiency Through Automation.

The Takeaway

If you're using a practice management system, it cannot be stressed enough how much time you will be putting back into your day. For decades, attorneys would keep time by hand on a piece of paper, or retype every single document that had one small change to it. And many still do that today, but the reason why this technology was created is that it helps you do your job faster, in fewer bottlenecks, and with more accuracy. Sure, adopting this technology is a change in mindset, but once you can get there mentally, you will realize the benefits of utilizing today's technology far outweigh the initial uncomfortableness of breaking old habits.

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