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How to Use Legal Technology to Address Law Firm Administrative Bottlenecks

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Law firm administrators wear all types of hats on any given day of the week. Their work impacts the financial health of the firm, while also promoting the efficient provision of legal services. As the link between the legal and business sides of a firm, these professionals need a strong grasp on a variety of organizational concepts. From human resources to accounting responsibilities, administrators handle a wide range of duties as they seek to maintain and grow their law firms.

Some of the most common responsibilities of a law firm administrator include:

- Gathering and analyzing firm financial data
- Handling human resources processes
- Managing and coordinating firm support staff
- Automating law firm processes
- Coordinating law firm operations
- Crafting and implementing firm marketing procedures

Decisions made by law firm administrators greatly impact the financial and operational wellbeing of a law firm. Firm leaders count on administrators to identify existing and potential problems, then implement strategies to properly address them. When the administrator's efforts result in greater profitability and enhanced productivity, the law firm benefits overall.

5 Administrative Bottlenecks

With so many processes taking place under the umbrella of law firm administration, numerous opportunities for bottlenecks exist. Bottlenecks occur when procedural inefficiencies prevent firm processes from progressing effectively. These inefficiencies may arise for a variety of reasons, including but not limited to staffing issues or procedural deficiencies. Inadequate technology is another common cause for law firm administrative bottlenecks, but with so many tech advances happening within the legal community, these problems should be easily addressed.
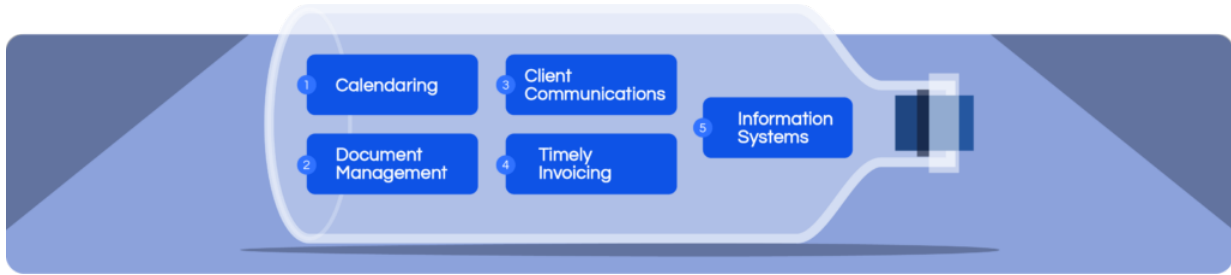
Let's look at some of the bottlenecks that law firm administrators commonly deal with when working to maximize firm productivity:

1. Calendaring

About one quarter of legal malpractice claims directly relate to calendaring failures. Issues such as forgotten deadlines, late filings, and missed appearances can lead to serious consequences for law firms. Judges don't have much compassion for firms that miss important case events, and many won't hesitate to dismiss cases when lawyers fail to meet deadlines.

Particularly within larger firms, maintaining an adequate calendaring system can prove challenging. They have significantly more dates and matters to coordinate between a larger number of lawyers. They may also handle a wider variety of practice areas across multiple jurisdictions.

Paper calendaring simply does not offer a sufficient solution, so legal calendaring technology needs to play a central role in any law firm administration strategy. These systems offer numerous alternatives for law practices, including:

- Rules-based calendaring that includes court rules databases and holiday tables for the accurate calculation of court dates.
- Online date calculation services where firm members log into a website and enter a few pieces of information to receive an automatically generated listing of all relevant court deadlines.
- A firm-wide calendar system that promotes consistency and productivity firm-wide, while also offering various viewing formats for specific offices and practice groups.

2. Document Management

Unfortunately, most law firms have experienced the obstructive delays that accompany missing files and data. Firm administrators recognize that the lack of document management hurts client relationships, damages cases, and leads to potential malpractice claims. Firm attorneys and paralegals need access to necessary case files, but the manual access of physical documents is inconvenient and inefficient.

With cloud-based document storage, firm members have the ability to access necessary documents from anywhere. These platforms use the cloud to offer law firms a secure, orderly, and highly available tool for data storage. Platforms, like NetDocuments, offer a cloud-based document management system that keeps law firms organized and productive.

3. Client Communications

Inadequate client communications also commonly lead to legal malpractice claims. Whether it's miscommunication, negligible communication, or a lack of any communication at all, law firm administrators must understand the potential consequences of failing to make communication a

priority.

Law firm communication problems can cause external and internal issues, and they stem from various sources. Externally, an overwhelming number of incoming calls may result in overflowing voicemail boxes and unanswered messages. Internally, the challenges of remote work may cause barriers to communication between firm members.

Technology provides a solution for both internal and external law firm communication challenges. Law firm administrators should choose software systems that include such coordinated communication tools as:

- The ability for lawyers to privately send and receive texts from clients.
- A client portal that provides clients with access to information specific to their matter any time of day or night.
- Collaboration tools that help various law firm members easily communicate with one another and efficiently work together on client matters.

4. Timely Invoicing

Many law firm administrators identify billing processes as an area ripe for bottlenecks within a law firm. This is partly due to the numerous steps that go into crafting and sending client bills for legal services. For example, the billing process actually begins with time tracking completed tasks. When timekeepers fail to keep accurate records, they risk overbilling clients or shorting the firm of billed hours.

Delayed timekeeping negatively impacts the invoicing process, and delayed invoices mean that clients can't pay their bills on time, decreasing the firm's cash flow. Billing inaccuracies also result in delayed payments and strained relationships as clients question the integrity of the firm.

Law firm administrators need to invest in legal billing software options that promote improved invoicing practices. These systems speed up the legal billing process so that law firms get paid faster. With the right platform, law firm administrators can streamline the markups, billing edits, and the approval process. The firm also benefits from e-billing and billing portals that allow clients to quickly view and pay their invoices with ease.

5. Information Systems

The lack of effective technologies causes major bottlenecks in various areas of law firm administration. For this reason, the administrator needs to consistently evaluate and manage all of the firm's operating and information systems. Administrators need to understand the hardware and software commonly used within law firm environments.

When managing computer systems, law firm administrators should do the following to avoid bottlenecks:

- Periodically evaluate the effectiveness of all hardware and software used by the firm to identify what changes are needed to increase efficiency and promote cost savings.
- Regularly review maintenance contracts to ensure that hardware and software and kept up-to-date and in working order.

The most valuable computer system that a law firm can implement is practice management software. With it, law firms have a tool that efficiently maintains, organizes, and tracks case information related to client matters. By building case files directly into practice management software, firms can more efficiently update and complete tasks. These tools also help prevent other bottlenecks through document management, calendaring systems, contact management, and billing capabilities.

Successful Law Firm Administration Requires Legal Technology

The law firm administrator keeps the entire firm running with productivity and efficiency. A huge part of that responsibility involves identifying bottlenecks and implementing solutions to address them. The latest technology offers the features that law firm administrators need to address the many inefficiencies that hamper law firm processes.

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