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Navigating the Complex Client Relations and Billing Arrangements of Family Law

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Family and domestic relations law firm administrators often deal with three major challenges when handling their practice management duties – client relations, varied billing arrangements, and compliant trust accounting. If handled incorrectly, each of these important components can cause major headaches.

Busy family law firms need legal practice management software that helps navigate each of these challenges with the following features:

Client Relations

Domestic law clients are often going through some of the most stressful times of their lives. They may be dealing with the pain of a divorce, the financial challenges of a broken family, or the fear of losing custody of a child. When they seek out a law firm for assistance, these emotional situations can show up in the form of high expectations and limited patience.

All law firms need to maintain a high level of client service, but family law attorneys often feel an even greater responsibility to provide a premium client experience. This important goal can be met in several ways:

1. Effective Communication

Family law firms need effective communication strategies to keep clients satisfied with the level of service being provided. Administrators should implement a proactive communication style where the firm initiates and maintains dialogue throughout the lifecycle of the matter. This keeps clients informed and comforted by the knowledge that work is being completed on their behalf.

Some of the tools that family law practitioners can use to implement this strategy include a client portal where clients can log into their personalized account any time of the day or night to view correspondence, see task deadlines, receive firm messages, and review billing information.

2. Accurate Calendaring

An effective calendaring system also helps family law firms support positive client experiences. With comprehensive calendaring, firm members can keep ahead of pending deadlines and court appearances, while also keeping clients informed about important dates.

It is not unusual for a busy family law practice to have multiple deadlines, events, and reminders on the calendar every day. They need a practice management system that provides administrators with a bird's eye view of the entire firm, along with giving individual attorneys and teams calendaring information tailored to their specific caseloads. From discovery deadlines to mediation appointments, missing a deadline or court appearance can be detrimental to the attorney-client relationship, so domestic relations lawyers must have tools to always stay on top of their calendars.

3. Streamlined Intakes

Family law clients often wait until the very last minute to secure legal services. So, they may walk in the door for the intake appointment with a pendente lite or child support hearing already scheduled. Family law firms can address this challenge with legal practice management features that automate the intake processes. Automated workflows and conflict checks can streamline the process so representation can begin expeditiously.

Billing Arrangements

Along with criminal defense practices, domestic relations law firms have been at the forefront of introducing [alternative billing arrangements](#) into the legal industry. Many of these firms have been offering flat fee uncontested divorces for years. While these alternative arrangements may simplify some matters, they may not be appropriate for all family cases. This creates a situation where family law firms may need to utilize multiple billing types within their caseloads. For that reason, firms need legal practice management and billing systems that can handle various billing arrangements with the following tools:

1. Simplified Billing Procedures

With a seamless invoicing process, family law firms can quickly prepare, generate, and deliver bills to clients regardless of their billing arrangement. Whether the matter is being billed on an hourly basis, as a fixed fee, or as a project, the firm's billing software must have the capacity to leverage the invoicing process quickly and easily with minimal input from law firm staff. Once the billing method has been applied to the matter, the system should automatically use it in the generation of all invoices.

2. Quick and Easy Timekeeping

Whether working on a flat fee matter or using the traditional billable hour, family law attorneys need the tools to efficiently track time spent on a matter. For hourly billing, timekeeping data forms the basis of the invoice and how the law firm gets paid. Without tracked time, there is no compensation. For fixed-fee arrangements, timekeeping gives law firms a better sense of how hours are being spent by firm professionals.

Within a legal practice, wasted time equates to lost revenue. With [time tracking data](#), family law firm administrators can review how time is being spent and make adjustments to improve efficiency, productivity, and profitability.

Effective timekeeping tools also add value to family law attorneys as they work away from the office. With cloud-based timekeeping software, they can accurately record their tasks whether they are in a courthouse, conducting a home visit, or attending a client mediation. Some practice management software options even offer automated time capture features that automatically track

the amount of time spent on client calls, including those made from a cell phone.

Trust Accounting

As stated earlier, while many family law firms utilize flat fee arrangements for simpler matters, they may still use the billable hour for more complex cases. This is typically done through a retainer agreement, where the client remits an amount of money for the firm to hold in trust. As work is completed on the matter, the firm transfers money from that trust account to another firm account.

A lot of rules and regulations exist around the management and usage of trust accounts, so family law administrators need practice management software that promotes compliance and takes the pressure off firm members.

1. Integrated Accounting Features

Family law firms need [integrated accounting tools](#) that help them maintain compliance with the rules of their respective state bars. Even a single mistake can lead to trouble that could have been avoided with the right practice management software.

Efficient billing systems automatically track client funds as they are moved from one account to another. They also provide firms with the capability to manage and report on multiple client IOLTA bank accounts. With comprehensive legal accounting tools, family law firms can maintain all their accounts in one platform for secure and accurate management.

2. Financial Reporting

The ability to run up-to-date and accurate financial [reports](#) is also necessary for compliant law firm trust accounting. Some jurisdictions require detailed reporting for individual trust accounts. In addition, should a disagreement or discrepancy arise, the ability to quickly provide a detailed report can mean the difference between clearing up the issue and making a bigger problem for the firm. With financial reporting capabilities, domestic relations law firm administrators can keep a consistent and accurate view of all the firm's financial data.

Managing Client Relations and Alternate Billing Requires Thorough Legal Practice Management

Family law clients have a lot on their plates as they try to care for their families and traverse the waters of domestic relations law. Family law firms can alleviate some of their worries by implementing legal practice management tools that promote excellent client service, streamline various billing arrangements, and promote accurate trust accounting.

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