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What Practice Management Features Does Your Firm Need?

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Did you know that only 33% of firms with 10–49 attorneys use practice management software? Furthermore, only 51% of firms with 100+ attorneys use practice management software. We find that a lot of firms become interested in adopting practice management if they only have a billing system when they begin to evaluate new technology. And we agree that if a firm is coming from a system that strictly handles billing, it is a good time to consider moving to a practice management system.

A practice management system creates a hub for the entire firm to find information about your cases, which makes you more efficient and allows you to give better client services, answer questions faster, and gain a better grasp of your data.

Understanding Key Features

Practice management is a feature-rich component of legal technology so we are going to start with a few different elements that may be important for your firm.

Although every practice management system on the market today should be able to store all of the important information about your cases in one spot, they vary in terms of customization. For example, not every practice management software allows you to edit fields or use multiple matter layouts. If your firm specializes in multiple practice areas, this type of flexibility is something you may really need.

Overall, most firms will be looking for two overarching features: calendaring/task management and document/email management. Let's dive into these first.

Calendaring and Task Management

Calendaring. It seems so simple – trivial even. Yet nothing is more critical to your day-to-day operations than an accurate and up-to-date calendar. Evaluating and understanding the types of calendars each attorney uses – and how they use them – is critical. Even if you're a pencil-and-paper type of firm, practice management software provides a considerable amount of calendaring advantages that can't be ignored.

For starters, it gives you a centralized calendar that is backed up and allows you to choose from multiple views along with a matter-centric view. You can even create tasks through workflow automation that are built into each calendar view. This means that all of the activities associated with meeting specific deadlines can be configured into customizable matter templates depending on individual deadlines.

From an organizational standpoint, this results in everyone having a better idea of when a document has been prepared and when tasks have been completed. And if that isn't enough visibility, users can subscribe to a specific matter feed to get alerts for every asset pertaining to that matter. This is great for collaborative firms or those that have a heavy workload and need help juggling a multitude of tasks.

All of this sounds great, right? But how does it fit within the complete picture of your firm? To avoid getting overwhelmed, start by asking yourself these questions:

- Does your firm have a standardized calendaring process?
- What does the software's calendaring look like?
- Does the software integrate with your other platforms like Outlook or Google Calendar?
- How does the sync work? Is it bi-directional sync?
- Will the software allow you to set up deadline scheduling? Will it allow you to work with a third

party that pulls in those deadlines for you?

- Does the software allow you to create chain calendar events so that, for example, if you have a trial date on Monday the 1st, you will automatically be notified five days prior on the 25th of the previous month regarding tasks you need to complete in advance?

- Does the software offer adequate filters and views? Is there a certain view you rely on with your current calendar that you need to manage your calendars?

One of the major benefits to a firm-wide calendar is that you can see everybody's calendar and schedule multiple events with several attendees all at once, or select only the peoples' calendars you need to see – no more having to do it manually one at a time. The ability to sort and change your views as you see fit will ensure you always have visibility into the matters and projects you need when you need it.

The other thing to consider is your calendar reporting. Suppose you're the type of firm that prefers to distribute your calendar reports. In that case, you'll want to make sure that the software allows you to generate – and perhaps print – the reports you need for providing various insights, appointments, and deadlines to the relevant members of your team.

On the task management side, a lot of firms currently use Outlook. Moving forward, you have to think about what kind of task management your firm wants in the future. Some software offers Kanban-style task management. Is that something that is important to you? Firms that use Outlook or just a whiteboard for their task organization find it difficult to assign activities to various staff and then keep track of those activities as they progress. How does your firm currently handle this and could your process be made more efficient?

The point of task management is to make it easy for your partners and managing attorneys to check the progress of their cases. How easy is it for them to do this now? Can they see at a glance what has been completed and what hasn't been completed? The goal of any task management platform is to be able to get an overview of where any case stands at any given point in time.

Document and Email Management

Essentially, you have two options here: You can either go with the practice management system or you can use an integration dedicated to document management. When you're evaluating document management, you need to look at a few things.

Begin with how you need your documents to be structured.

- Do you prefer folders?
- Do you want a system that is going to categorize and assign different metadata tags to your documents?
- Is the system going to force people to save their documents a certain way or can they file them however they want?
- How important is it to be able to search for those documents?
- How powerful is the search capability within the system and does that include the text of those documents or OCR (optical character recognition) functionality?
- Do you need to version your documents?
- Can you share those documents with members of your team via a portal or share link?

Some software uses plugins for Microsoft Word that allow you to create template documents. Is that important for your firm to have? If you have a form that you use over and over again, will the software be able to automatically populate the blanks with the new contacts' information? We often see firms manually replacing a client's information with a new client's information, which can lead to embarrassing and critical human errors.

Storage is also an important factor. How big is your drive now? How much would it cost you for additional storage? These are things you definitely want to evaluate when thinking about document management systems.

On the other side of the coin is your email management. Some practice management systems let you save emails directly from Outlook or Gmail to the system itself. If you're planning on saving them, how easy is it to do so? We have seen instances where the user is made to drag and drop the folder or has to CC a specific email address. However, some will automatically save them for you.

Once you have learned how saving emails works within the system, the next step is to ask how the system will store the actual emails you save. Is it making copies of them or is it simply linking to those emails? Is it converting them? If you need to use those emails again or bring them forth as evidence, they need to be stored in the native MSG format. A lot of systems don't do this so this is definitely something you need to keep front of mind. Getting emails into the system is one thing, but getting them out may be another story. And, just like with your documents, you're going to want to find out what search capabilities are available for your emails. Does the system make it easy for you to find the things you need based on a one-word search? If you get over 200 emails a day, the last thing you have time for is sifting through all of those for one line item.

Workflow

If we go back to the basics, workflow itself is defined as the sequence of industrial, administrative, or other processes through which a piece of work passes from initiation to completion (thanks, Google). For many attorneys, finding tools to free up more time to bill is essential to growing their practice. Based on a recent survey, law offices responded that they spent 40% of their time on administrative or manual tasks. So, is workflow something you should consider? Our answer is yes, but we will let you decide.

Essentially, workflow brings process and automation together. Workflow takes a process, adds highly defined inputs and outputs, and uses automation to complete the tasks on your behalf. For example, a client fills out a form on the website which triggers a potential client record to be populated in the database. Once a new record is created in the database, an email is automatically generated and sent to the prospective client thanking them and letting them know someone from the firm will be in touch with them shortly. Then, a task is created and assigned to the firm administrator to contact the potential client. The firm administrator then contacts the prospective client and completes the task, updating the potential client status to “initial consult scheduled,” finally triggering the system to generate a merged fee agreement letter.

For many law firms, workflow can be a game-changer by creating structure and efficiencies within their practice.

Although the list is long, here are some of the most important benefits workflow can bring to a law firm:

- Frees up time to bill: Workflow can take over a lot of your administrative load, freeing up more time for your attorneys to focus on billable work.

- Keeps the database clean: It’s common to hear a law firm say its practice management database is a mess. If you’re using workflow, the system can keep records up to date so your staff doesn’t have to manually do it.

- Makes your small law firm feel big: Building out your processes into a workflow will increase your staff efficiency, allowing you to accomplish more with less staff.

- Speeds up onboarding staff: If you use workflow correctly, new staff will be walked through the required processes and prompted to enter the necessary information. This means less training upfront for new hires because your staff has less to remember or be trained on.

Communication Tools and Portals

Many software programs today integrate with services like Microsoft Teams or have an internal chat function already embedded in the software. These capabilities allow you to facilitate more streamlined communication around matter management and tasks, ultimately creating a more cohesive and efficient team.

As important as it is to maintain thorough internal communication, it is just as essential to be able to communicate externally with your clients. Does your current system allow you to text and call your clients? Does it track and record the time you spend communicating with those clients? Evaluate how you currently work with each of your clients, how they prefer to be communicated with, and if there are any points of friction that could be smoothed out.

Client portals are getting prevalent to the point of becoming a standard feature that your future clients expect. What does your client service look like right now? Does your team lose billable hours because you spend a majority of your morning answering client questions that could easily be answered through a client portal? Do you give your clients the autonomy to pull the answers they need on their own or do they still rely on getting in contact with you?

In order to improve client communication and create a client-centric approach to your day-to-day tasks, here are some priorities you should keep in mind when setting up a portal:

Focus on Storage

Most client portals come built-in with file storage attributed to each matter at your firm. The key is to make sure everyone uses the portal from the start of the case; this way, all paperwork, notes, and updates are logged for clients to take advantage of whenever it’s convenient. It’s a two-way street – a spot for clients to access things they may be wondering about in their case, and a tool for staff to easily share files when used with law management software.

Focus on Security

Between all the digital phishing and security breaches, hacking emails has become way more common. Why put your clients’ sensitive information at risk of being compromised when a portal is a perfectly viable alternative to holding all their data in one place? The nice thing is your clients won’t need to download anything additional to access their files – any internet-enabled device will be able to log on to view updates and they’ll receive a simple notification email whenever any new information becomes available. Security should always be at the forefront of your firm’s mind so clients feel safe when interacting with you. It will create a seamless, positive experience that they’ll be sure to recommend to others.

Geographical Flexibility

Depending on your area of law, a client portal can diminish the issues that arise with distance. Whether a client has temporarily relocated or your firm is currently working remotely for the time being, everyone can be logged in and have access to all the necessary information on both sides. Not only is this more convenient, but it also creates a better place for client-centric interactions on an ongoing basis. Smoother communication and collaboration leads to better efficiency for everyone.

Potential Client Tracking

Attorneys are spread thin, and a lot of their time is spent on non-billable labor instead of billable tasks. In fact, on average, lawyers only bill for 2.3 hours of their time daily. After factoring in realization and collection rates, the average lawyer only collects about 1.6 hours of billable time per day. And to take it a step further, about 33% of an average lawyer's time is spent on business development. To this point, did you know that two out of three potential clients say their decision to hire a firm is most influenced by a lawyer's responsiveness to their first call or email?

The problem here is that interruptions, like emails and calls, are not just zapping time away in the immediate sense; they come saddled with a recovery time that results in a 2-hour time loss per day. If you're getting these intake calls, they may not always result in good clients, which is a further waste of your time. Without an effective process, you're losing money – it's as simple as that.

All of this brings us to this question: How are you tracking the new leads that come in? Whether they are from your website or over the phone, how are you monitoring your business development?

Most of your new clients will find you online, so you should automatically be asking yourself if this new practice management software allows you to integrate your firm's intake form directly into your website? Does it provide a way for you to track referrals or assign workflow tasks to different people based on the referral source? Are you able to monitor and analyze conversion statistics based on different marketing campaigns you run? By having access to these metrics, you can gauge your return on investment and allocate funds directly to the campaigns that are seeing the most success. This intake process looks different from firm to firm, but at its core, you need to be able to track data efficiently and access it whenever you need it, from wherever you are. Here is a high-level framework outlining the steps your practice management software could help facilitate:

1. Getting started: When a PNC first makes contact with your firm
2. Confirm the PNC’s basic details
3. Screen the PNC and conduct a conflict check
4. Approval: Grant or deny initial consultation
5. Gather pre-consult information (if you didn’t have enough information prior to conduct a conflict check, do so now)
6. Consult
7. Organize post-consult information
8. Send over a new client agreement
9. Gather necessary documents

A huge part of the client intake process is cultivating the relationships that are most fruitful for your firm and then tracking the progress that comes from those leads. Being able to pull lists and reports on current clients and potential new clients is paramount to your firm’s growth.

For example, a huge area we see come up for new and existing client tracking is the holiday list.

The holidays only come once a year, but when the season arrives, do you have a way to quickly download a list of names and organize them based on importance to your firm? Who gets the gift card versus the $200 bottle of wine?

Third-Party Integrations

The last step to evaluating your practice management software is to make sure that the vendor offers the third-party integrations that your firm deems essential. Whether it's a way to text your client, document management, or calendaring tools, you should have a list of all the tools you currently use and make sure the vendors you're looking at can pair well with them.

The Takeaway

This was a lot to digest! The bottom line is there are a lot of options your firm can take when considering what practice management features you want, the ones you need, and the ones that may just be luxury. Do your homework, and use this blog as a guide to help you make informed decisions!

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