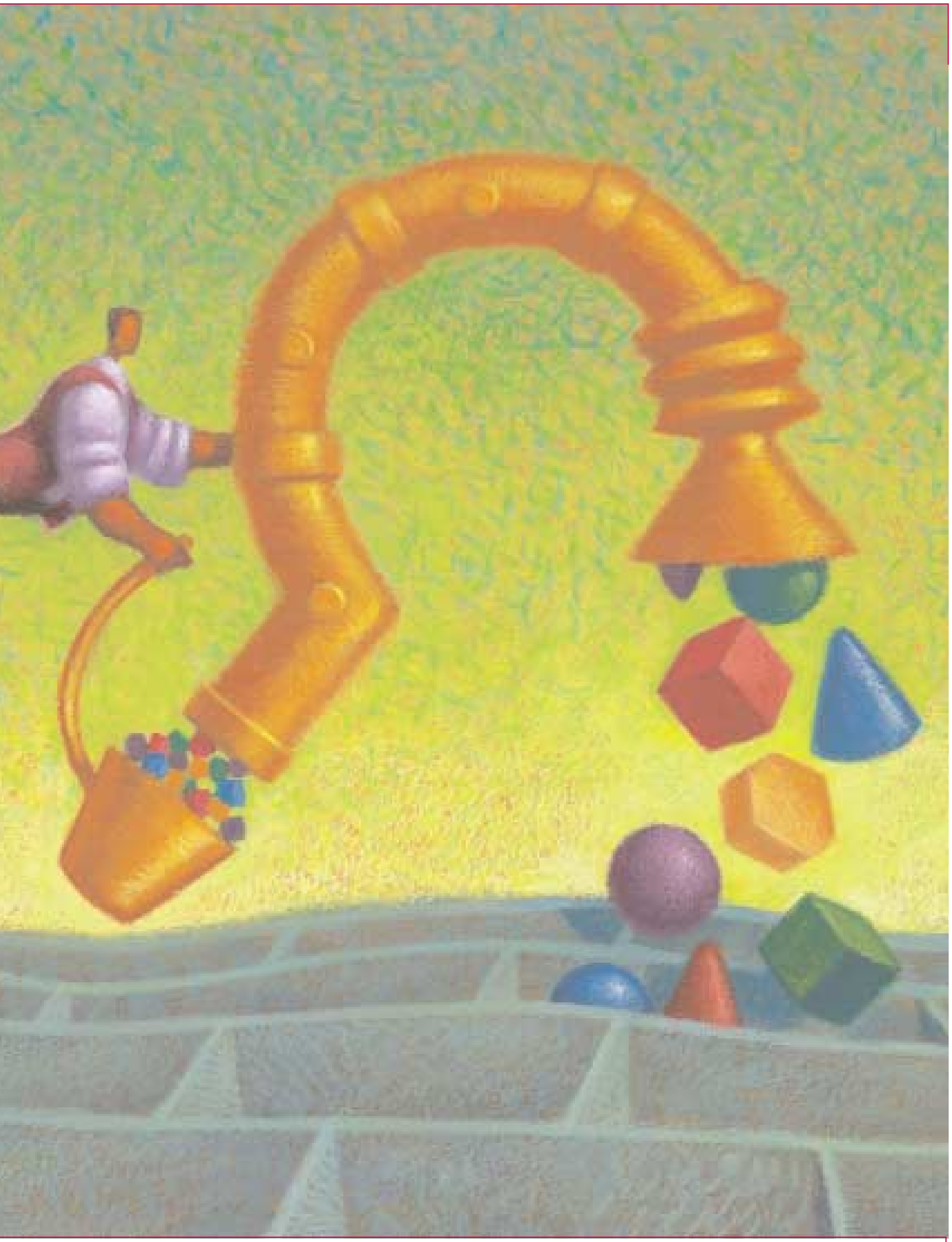
The World of Intranet, Extranet and Portal Technologies



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About ILTA

Providing technology solutions to law firms and legal departments gets more complex every day. Connecting with your peers to exchange ideas with those who have "been there, done that" has never been more valuable.

For over two decades, the International Legal Technology Association (formerly known as LawNet) has led the way in sharing knowledge and experience for those faced with challenges in their firms and legal departments. ILTA members come from firms of all sizes and all areas of practice, all sharing a common need to have access to the latest information about products and support services that impact the legal profession.

ILTA's Statement of Purpose: ILTA is the premier peer networking organization providing information resources to members in order to make technology work for the legal profession.

Editors' Note

Perry Mason, who started his practice in 1933, would be painfully lost in today's legal world, especially when it comes to communications. Poor Perry had only a black rotary telephone, not even a cell, much less a PDA.

Today, we are more fortunate, although the array of technological possibilities can sometimes be daunting. The Internet is at our constant disposal for research, and intranets, extranets and portals provide the means to collaborate with colleagues, exchange documents, manage business processes, market services and much more.

The articles that follow will undoubtedly expand your thinking about what is possible with intranets, extranets and portals, as well as provide a few caveats. Bill Gratsch of Dykema Gossett shares his firm's extranet experiences and challenges us to continue to push forward the technology. Rob Saccone and Jeff Wolf of xmLaw, Inc. help us understand the pros and cons of MS SharePoint 2003. Justin Bickler and Sarah Loveland of Advanced Legal Systems identify eight areas where the concept of the intranet can be extended.

We're sure these authors, as well as the others who generously contributed to this white paper, will give you lots to ponder.

Diane South and Randi Mayes, Editors

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About the Authors

Jerry Askew is an Associate Member of ILTA and has served in senior management and CIO roles at various mid-sized national law firms. Jerry is currently working as an independent consultant assisting law firms with business process automation, electronic records management and information security. He can be contacted at jerry@askew.net.

Justin Bickler is the Technical Project Manager for Advanced Legal Systems, Inc. With experience in 10,000+-user Enterprise systems management, he brings with him a combination of a solid technical background, professional certifications and extensive project management skills. With Advanced Legal Systems Justin's successes include Novell Netware to Windows Server 2003 conversions, GroupWise to Exchange Migrations, enterprise-wide desktop and server replacements, as well as the design and maintenance of Active Directory and Citrix environments. He can be reached at 503.227.5400 or jbickler@advancedlegal.com.

Bill Gratsch is the Web Technologies Manager at Dykema Gossett PLLC, a Midwest-based law firm of nearly 400 attorneys and professionals with offices in California, Illinois, Michigan and Washington, D.C. He has served in a variety of legal, technical and management positions within both the public and private sectors over the past nine years. He is currently the ILTA VCR for the Detroit Metropolitan area. Bill can be contacted at 313.568.6828 or wgratsch@dykema.com.

Kenneth Jones is the Chief Operating Officer of the Xerdict Group LLC, a leading provider of collaboration products for law firms and corporate legal departments. Previously, he held various applications development leadership positions in pharmaceutical and chemical companies, including Bristol-Myers Squibb and Union Carbide, where he led innovative efforts to build Internet website content management systems, legal case management and electronic billing systems and worldwide order processing and logistics systems. Ken can be contacted at 973.820.1132 or kenneth.jones@xerdict.com.

Vijay Kaushik is the Founder/President of inetsupport, inc., a leading provider of technology consulting and implementation services for law firms, developer of inetportal, a .NET-based intranet/portal solution, and inettime, a .NET-based time and attendance solution. Vijay has spent the last 20 years working with law firm automation and technology. He can be reached at vijayk@inetsupport.com.

Ginny Keller is the Operations Manager for Solutions in Software, Inc., developer of CaseManagerPro. Her 18-year IT background includes five years as an Advanced Technical Services Specialist for IBM and their Intel-based server line. She has worked on the design and implementation of computer systems at top tier companies and government agencies, including Wal-Mart, Chevron-Texaco, Exxon-Mobil, NASA and Schlumberger. She can be contacted at g.keller@casemanagerpro.com.

Sarah Loveland is Vice-President of Business Development for Advanced Legal Systems, Inc. She has over six years of experience working in legal technology and works to identify and develop custom solutions to fit law firm IT requirements. Sarah has written and presented on a variety of topics such as implementing case management, maximizing Internet presence and monitoring employee Internet and e-mail usage. She can be reached at sloveland@advancedlegal.com.

Shannon McMahon is a Product Marketing Manager at Interwoven (formerly iManage), responsible for the law firm, corporate and government legal markets. She has more than 15 years of legal industry experience, marketing products such as office information systems, e-mail security software and document management systems. Shannon can be reached at smcmahon@interwoven.com.

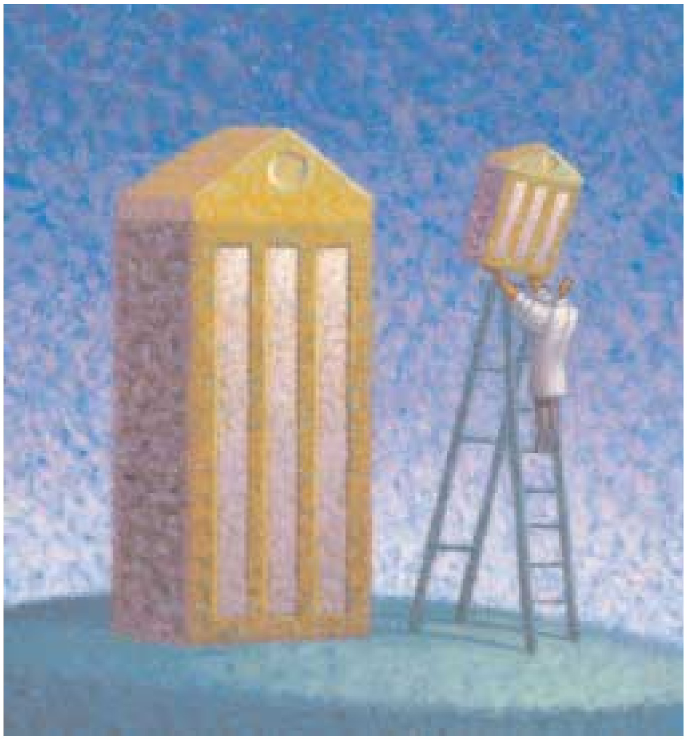
Cathy Planchard is Director of Marketing Communications at VIACK Corporation, a leading authority on private, online business meetings and communications. Cathy oversees outbound marketing and communications vehicles for the company, including corporate communications, public affairs, lead generation activities, promotions and events. VIACK's flagship product, VIA3 E-meeting Service, includes voice and video over Internet protocol (VoIP), joint document editing of Word, PowerPoint and Excel documents, whiteboarding and instant messaging. Cathy can be reached at 480.735.5900.

Rob Saccone is President and CEO of xmLaw Inc., a technology firm providing software and services to the legal industry. Rob has more than 10 years of software development, architecture and management experience with the last five years focusing on the legal industry. Rob can be reached at rsaccone@xmlaw.net.

Jeff Wolf is Director of Product Management for xmLaw. Jeff has more than 12 years of experience designing and implementing software systems and has worked in the legal industry for the past five years. Jeff can be reached at jwolf@xmlaw.net.

Law Firm Extranets: What We Learned Along the Way

by Bill Gratsch of Dykema Gossett PLLC



At Dykema Gossett (Dykema), we deployed our first extranet in the spring of 2001. After initially experimenting with a hosted extranet service provider, we decided to partner with a third-party developer to design and deploy a custom client extranet platform. Dykema's Client Collaboration Site® (CCS™) went live on April 1, 2002, and during the next two and a half years, we rolled out over 25 more extranet sites that covered a myriad of clients and uses. The growth and use of these sites continues, and it's clear that extranet technologies are generating more interest and more activity among our attorneys and clients than ever before.

We've come a long way in less than four years, but we had to work through many issues along the way — issues like how to present an extranet; how many and what type of features our lawyers, staff and clients want; how an extranet can best be utilized; and how to measure its success or failure. Having learned all this, and bridged the gap between simply deploying an extranet site and actually getting it used, we'd like to share with you some of our experiences.

At the beginning, the most common question we received was: "What is an extranet?" Never mind that many of those asking were already using one — they just didn't realize that the extranet concept they were already using for personal business (*e.g.*, online banking, retirement account tracking) was entirely applicable to their daily legal business. The lesson for us was that we couldn't and wouldn't assume anything about how much or how little our users knew about extranets.

The Key to Demo Success: Simplicity

We also quickly learned in our demonstrations, both inside and outside the firm, that telling a complicated story with elaborate case studies, detailed explanations and/or overviews of every "bell and whistle" our site offered was often met with yawns and blank stares, occasionally even hostility. We were making the mistake of giving too many details before our audiences had time to digest and comprehend the still-relatively new concept of an extranet and how it could help them in their legal work. Moreover, we often found that our extranet demonstration was only a small part of a longer meeting or presentation that had a lot of "non-extranet" ground to cover. For an audience of individuals with busy schedules and limited exposure to extranet technologies, cramming too much information into a 10- or 15-minute presentation proved to be too much, too soon, and was ultimately counterproductive.

These early lessons led us to an education process that we use today with great success. For starters, we configure a basic, customized extranet site for each client or practice group meeting and utilize the site for our presentation, allowing the audience to visualize how their specific extranet site will "look and feel." We then present a simple definition of an extranet in the context of the actual site. The combination of the visual image and the definition works well, and more often than not the Dykema attorney or client immediately "gets" it.

We then demonstrate only a select few functions of the site, answering questions and giving real-world examples along the way. For example, showing a client how quickly documents can be added to the extranet's document repository has been an effective and simple demonstration.

By limiting the scope of our demonstration, we find that each presentation can be adjusted on the fly and tailored to the length of time we have to present — and still be effective in introducing our extranet. Demonstrating the extranet site in this straightforward manner keeps both Dykema attorneys and clients from feeling overwhelmed, and they even take part in the presentation, offering insightful comments and ideas for modifications to make the site better fit their needs.

The final aspect of Dykema's "simple picture" approach is to immediately give audience members their user IDs and passwords, thus allowing them to log in and test out their site at a later time, from the location of their choosing and without the pressure of a meeting with multiple agenda items looming overhead. This is quite well-received. In fact, at the launch of a new site, we often receive questions and useful feedback from attorneys, clients and staff who take the time to log in and test out a site before it goes live.

Initial Deployment: Skip the Bells and Whistles

When we deploy the extranet site for real world use, the IT department typically needs to make a few modifications. Here again, we've learned from the past where we had some negative experiences after deploying sites with every feature and function turned on. Now we know that the simplicity of our demonstrations should usually be carried over into the initial site deployment. For many of the same reasons mentioned earlier, lawyers, clients and staff invariably tell us they feel overwhelmed by sites that contain all the available "bells and whistles."

Thanks to this user feedback and our experience in presentations, we now deploy initial extranet sites with a focus on the key features that the attorneys wish to use right away, such as a document repository, contact lists and site calendars. Other, less immediately critical features are left hidden in the wings, ready to be added only as necessary. The end result is a very clean, uncluttered home page. With only a few icons or links to click, lawyers, clients and staff alike tell us they feel the simplified home pages are user-friendly and manageable. Moreover, a simplified home page with a few key features requires extremely busy professionals to learn only a limited set of functions initially and does not require extensive training. In the end, we learned this lesson about initial site deployment: Less is more.

Grow the Site with Your Users

We've found that as the months after an initial site deployment pass, attorneys, clients and staff start asking for new features and functions. This is to be expected as they become more comfortable with using an extranet and want to explore additional ways to enhance their legal relationships.

The process of adding in these features and functions brings us to our next lesson learned: Growing an extranet site in line with your users' needs is a recipe for success.

Our experience reveals that a basic core extranet site with a handful of features is all some attorneys and clients really need. Their extranet can be as simple as a shared document repository. However, for those clients who need more complex functionality, we are prepared to grow their extranet site in line with these needs. For example, we may build a customized matter-tracking feature that is specific to a particular client's requirements. And, since our extranet platform is modularized, we can build this feature and then just plug it into the site home page.

From the users' perspective, gradually building the complexity of the extranet site in line with needs offers another significant plus. They only need to learn and master one new feature at a time. At the end of the year, they may find they are using a site with a multitude of features and functions, but the pace of the introductions made the expansion relatively easy. Indeed, the difference between introducing these items individually at a reasonable pace versus all at once or in a rapid sequence may be the key factor in determining whether an expanding site continues to enjoy success. In sum, whether a site is basic or complex, the best approach to meet your users' needs and ensure site utilization is to grow the site's complexity in line with their needs and comfort level.

Throw Away the Cookie Cutter

Looking back at Dykema's various extranet sites, the IS department recognized that we had to drop preconceived notions of extranet sites being all the same. Instead, we concluded that while some features are common to all extranet sites, no two sites are exactly alike. Some of the differences are superficial; others, more profound. Clearly, litigation differs from estate planning, and corporate securities work differs from health care practice. Thus, it stands to reason that extranet sites supporting each of these different types of practice should also be different.

Moreover, by attempting a cookie-cutter deployment, the IT department may unintentionally force its vision on a client relationship, rather than having the client vision drive the extranet design. The more optimal approach, especially given the ultimate goal of getting an extranet site utilized (not just deployed), is to break the cookie cutter and allow users to mold the site to fit their daily work processes. Without this recognition and approach, the end result may be lots of deployed sites gathering dust.

Making Enhancements: Assessing Success

The Visitor Traffic Trap

Judging the success or failure of a given extranet site is a tricky business. At Dykema, we continually focus on improving our extranet platform and try to measure each deployed site's success. A critical aspect of this measure is to periodically re-evaluate our existing sites to gauge site utilization. In our first series of reviews, we tended to look at site statistics like visitor traffic as a key indicator of success. We now realize that such statistics are not necessarily as useful for evaluating a legal extranet as they may be for other Web properties, such as our firm's Internet site.

Our realization came from our experiences, both in talking to attorneys and reviewing raw statistics. In particular, in reviewing one site that had been deployed for a significant time, the visitor logs revealed that the site did not record a single visit in three months, only to suddenly see a major traffic spike in the course of single week, all for no apparent reason.

Of course, there was a reason. And it goes to the heart of the practice of law and how legal extranets must be understood within that context. To be sure, there are client extranet sites that serve as daily, ongoing "meeting places" for the relationship between a law firm and its clients. But that's only one use among many.

As an example, the extranet site we were assessing was supporting a single legal matter, not an ongoing relationship. After further examination, we found that the three-month inactive period corresponded to a time of limited activity on the matter. Then, when a key date related to this matter approached, the attorneys initiated a surge of activity. This surge resulted in the large traffic spikes we saw in our evaluation.

The end result of this evaluation was to view user traffic statistics in a new light. The statistics remained useful, but for extranets that supported lawyers and legal practice, they were simply not the key "success" factor. The mere fact that an attorney or client logged into an extranet site a certain number of times simply did not provide a definitive metric. In short, legal extranets are not dot-com websites and should not be judged in the same way.

Don't Underestimate the Convenience Factor

Another factor to bear in mind in assessing extranet site success is attorney and client satisfaction. What a technology professional thinks of as "satisfaction" may be different from how an attorney or busy corporate executive defines the term. Case in point: How satisfying is the convenience of obtaining your documents 24-7 by simply logging into a globally-accessible extranet site?

Again and again, attorney and client feedback has touched on the fact that they love the convenience of self-serve, on-demand document retrieval. Attorneys handle documents — lots of documents, lots of times — and anything technology can do to make this process more efficient is not trivial. But many technology professionals have been utilizing extranets for years, and obtaining documents this way is simply expected. Ultimately, attorneys and corporate executives will probably feel the same way. But for now, don't ignore the small things (like convenience) in your assessment of whether a given extranet site is successful. It's the small things that your attorneys and clients may appreciate the most.

Don't Compare Apples to Oranges

A final lesson we learned with regard to assessing the success of our extranet sites was the peril of comparing apples to oranges. As an example, an estate planning site is very different from a litigation support site. You simply can't analyze the two sites through the same lens. An estate planning client may be ecstatic about a site that rarely changes and contains nothing but 10 documents and a bulletin board. In contrast, a litigation support site may contain thousands of documents and have 40 different users interacting daily. In the end, apples are apples, not oranges; at Dykema, we have found that comparing such divergent sites to assess success serves little purpose.

Looking Down the Road

At the start of each year, Dykema's IT department takes stock of all the changes in the firm's legal extranets during the previous year, and we find that legal-purposed extranets are really still in an early stage of development. We regularly encounter a large number of attorneys and legal staff across the spectrum of law firms, corporations and government entities who have limited exposure to legal-purposed extranets and are still developing in their minds how they will integrate the technology into their legal practice. The ever-changing nature and competitive forces within technology itself continue to drive vendors and developers to innovate. It seems evident that the legal extranet of the future will bear little resemblance to today's.

Legal extranet technologies continue to expand and morph in order to meet the diverse needs and requirements of the legal community. At the same time, the legal profession tends to be slow in adopting and utilizing these technologies. The challenge for IT professionals will be to continue to bridge that gap and push the utilization of extranet technologies forward, as we have at Dykema.

Built-In Security Key to Protecting Privacy

by Cathy Planchard of VIACK Corporation

Internet-based collaboration technologies are increasingly popping up in law firms of all sizes, enabling timely, efficient and inexpensive information sharing among colleagues and clients. While the Internet is an incredible tool for collaboration, it's important to make sure attorney/client privilege is always maintained.

IT administrators are responsible for ensuring that firewalls, anti-virus software and various network security devices are in place. When client information is at stake, however, that external protection is just not enough, given that the greatest threat to information within a firm is likely to be an insider, such as a disgruntled associate, rather than an external hacker. Gartner Group, a technology research and analysis firm, estimates that 70 percent of security incidents that actually cause loss, rather than mere annoyance, involve insiders.

Unfortunately, many applications do not offer assurance that confidentiality of shared information will be maintained — at least not without paying additional for added-on security "solutions."

So What Can Your Firm Do?

To keep your data private and protect client privacy, look for Internet-based collaboration technology with built-in security. Security should not be an add-on. Preferably, the application should be fully Advanced Encryption Standard (AES)-protected, with the highest levels of encryption allowed by U.S. law.

AES-protected security was a key consideration when Wilentz, Goldman & Spitzer, a firm with 165 attorneys in four offices located in New Jersey, Philadelphia and New York City, implemented e-meetings as an alternative to costly travel. According to WG&S's Chris Placitella, "We don't have to worry about breaking client/attorney privilege . . . as we were able to ensure complete privacy for all the data we're sharing."

Like extranets, intranets and portals, e-meetings software includes information sharing and storage. The best programs also offer features such as live video, audio, joint editing of documents and instant messaging.

Five Security Reminders

Here are five preventive measures to help ensure your data stays private:

Do not transmit sensitive data electronically without full encryption.

Make your data unintelligible at the file/data level.

Conduct online collaboration through software installed at the desktop, not through a browser interface on the unprotected Internet.

If using e-meetings, include audio and video components so attendees can be identified by their voices and faces.

Create a firmwide security and privacy policy and continually educate your employees. Rules include changing passwords frequently, limiting who has access to documents, defining who can participate in e-meetings and encrypting all confidential data.

Is MS SharePoint 2003 the Portal Solution for You?

by Rob Saccone and Jeff Wolf of xmLaw, Inc.

It's clear from the 2004 Technology Survey published by ILTA that the legal portal market is growing. Almost a third of the law firms in the survey said they were planning to implement a portal in 2005, and 21 percent said they were thinking about doing so at some point in the future.

According to the survey, which had 446 respondents representing more than 84,000 attorneys, Interwoven, MS SharePoint and Hummingbird are the three leading legal portal products, although no product has a commanding market share, and many law firms are choosing to develop their portals internally.

Much of the attention over the past year has been on Microsoft's SharePoint Portal Server 2003, a portal solution designed to connect people, teams and information. SharePoint 2003 promises to integrate business processes and applications and to improve knowledge management. This new version has significant improvements over its 2001 predecessor, a growing number of third-party add-ons and an attractive price point.

Historically, Microsoft has provided scalable and reliable infrastructure components and applications used in many law firms, but can a generic Microsoft portal solution meet the specific needs of law firms? As technologists serving the legal profession, we'd like to offer a close look at MS SharePoint 2003 and to give you a solid understanding of its pros and cons.

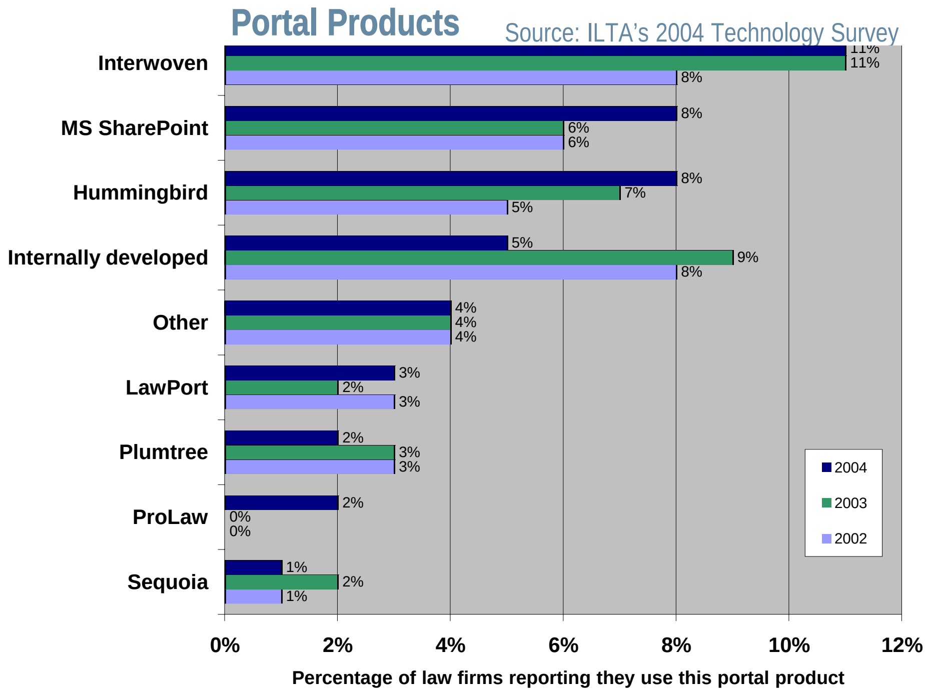
Two Microsoft Products, One Portal Solution

The terms intranet, extranet and portal often are used interchangeably to describe Web-based content management or knowledge management applications. Each implies a different level of access or functionality, but all refer to the same basic goal: a single point of access to content and functionality organized so users can find what they need easily and efficiently. Many firms have bought, built, mixed and matched products and technologies to achieve this goal — at significant cost — only to find the result does not meet expectations. When portals fail, the reasons are often lack of flexibility and poor integration, scalability and usability.

Microsoft, of course, has the advantage of its pervasive technology and wide acceptance of the .NET framework. In the portal market, the company created some confusion by changing its strategy and product branding. Two products actually comprise the SharePoint portal solution: Windows SharePoint Services and SharePoint Portal Server 2003. SharePoint Portal Server is part of Microsoft's Office System 2003, a larger family of products and services that includes the pervasive MS Office, and Windows SharePoint Services is part of Windows Server 2003. In general, "SharePoint" refers to the combined products and technologies of Windows SharePoint Services and SharePoint Portal Server 2003, but it's helpful to understand each product.

Windows SharePoint Services

Windows SharePoint Services is a collection of services included with Windows Server 2003 that adds collaborative functions to Microsoft's desktop applications. Users can work together on documents in quickly generated sites with online



discussions, notifications, surveys and searches. SharePoint Services also can be used as a development platform for creating collaboration and information-sharing applications. With the latest version, users can access SharePoint Services without leaving Office or Outlook.

SharePoint Services provides:

Team services and sites connected to Microsoft Office and other desktop applications.

An application development platform.

Core functionality for SharePoint sites, including lists, document libraries, calendars and contact integration.

Tools to create and work within collaborative spaces using a Web browser.

SharePoint Portal Server

SharePoint Portal Server is an enterprise portal application built on top of Windows SharePoint Services. It extends the capabilities of SharePoint Services by providing organization and management tools for SharePoint sites and site aggregation into a single portal. It offers search, categorization, subscription and application integration capability, as well as some document management services such as approval routing, check-in/check-out and versioning.

SharePoint Portal Server provides:

An interface where users can aggregate and navigate through content and view windows into various additional data sources and applications;

Integration of various systems into one solution with deployment options and management tools;

Delivery of personally relevant information through audience targeting and personalization and customization tools; and

Indexing and searching across file shares, Web servers, secure Web servers, Exchange Public Folders, Lotus Notes and SharePoint sites.

SharePoint's Development History

SharePoint Portal Server originally emerged from Microsoft's Digital Dashboard technology, a framework for building dynamic websites using modular components called "Web Parts." Released in 2001, SharePoint v.1 was positioned as both a document management and portal solution. It was built on the Web storage system, the same database technology used by Exchange Server. Microsoft positioned a related product named SharePoint Team Services as a solution for Web-based collaboration, but in reality the only relationship it had to the portal product was its name.

Ironically, Microsoft offered a version of the original Digital Dashboard technology that ran on SQL server but subsequently dropped support for this in favor of the SharePoint v.1 product. The current 2003 version has now circled back to SQL Server for data and document storage, dramatically improving SharePoint's scalability, reliability and performance.

Microsoft was surprisingly slow in introducing its newest competitive product, possibly because the concept of a portal framework was viewed as a threat: Organizations would be able to manage and deploy information and applications through a simple browser, promoting thin client architectures and reducing the need for expensive desktop software.

Not surprisingly, SharePoint was initially a strategy to stave off intrusions into Microsoft's desktop domain, and one of its greatest strengths was integration with Microsoft's desktop applications. SharePoint v.1's ease of deployment and usability were also strengths, but the product had significant drawbacks, including lack of customization and branding of the interface, poor backup and recovery support, difficult integration development, no set method for integrating with other Web content management systems, lack of scalability and poor navigation.

SharePoint Today

Building on a less-than-stellar initial product, SharePoint 2003 has become a bridge in Microsoft's foray into enterprise software and has addressed most of the problems experienced in the first version. In concept, it still provides the same modular approach to content and application development using Web Parts and Web Part Pages, but extends the capabilities of the initial product by merging the previously disconnected portal and collaboration tools.

Microsoft has made dramatic improvements in scalability, reliability, manageability, administration, personalization and integration. Internally, Microsoft moved responsibility for SharePoint from a disconnected development team to part of the Office System development team, indicating a long-term commitment to the product. SharePoint is now positioned as a critical component of the company's Office System, working in tandem with Exchange, Content Management Server, Live Communications Server and BizTalk Server.

Unlike most portal frameworks, which tend to be controlled and administered from the IT department, SharePoint allows management by non-technical staff. The current low user acceptance of portals is often due to the fact that what should be the simplest of tasks, such as posting information, requires IT intervention. IT departments are quickly overburdened with development and integration requests.

As an infrastructure component, SharePoint is hardy and robust. But it requires a fair amount of time and resources to create a usable intranet, extranet or portal. SharePoint provides powerful tools that can be just as easily used to create a disaster as a work of art. Taking SharePoint from its out-of-the-box state to a portal that will support the needs of a law firm often requires customization to the base product and/or introduction of third-party products and services in order to complete the solution. However, part of SharePoint's attractiveness as a solution is its ability to be easily customized and extended to meet these needs. The aftermarket for SharePoint-based solutions is growing rapidly, as is the availability of information and resources for both developers and decision makers.

SharePoint's Strengths

SharePoint offers advantages over its competition in several key areas:

Application Integration — One of the purposes of an intranet or extranet is to provide a unified portal to data and information. SharePoint offers robust tools to accomplish this goal, providing basic integration with structured data sources such as SQL Server or standards-based Web Services. In addition, many third-party products are becoming available that provide out-of-the-box integration with law firm applications such as document management, time and billing systems and client relationship management. This allows firms to deploy a portal solution that takes advantage of existing technology investments without the need for expensive custom development.

Content in Context — Perhaps one of the most valuable features of SharePoint is its ability to present data, information and knowledge in context, based on who the user is (audience targeting) and/or where the user is (such as a client, matter or practice area site or page). This allows firms to better utilize the systems and information they already have by simplifying access to it and organizing it in a logical, user-centered manner.

Enterprise Search — SharePoint provides a powerful indexing and search engine that allows users to search across multiple content sources simultaneously and browse search results by relevancy. Using the tools provided, SharePoint can index internal or external Web servers, network file shares, Exchange public folders and Lotus Notes databases, in addition to the content stored and managed within SharePoint itself. With third-party add-ons, SharePoint can also securely index content from other firm systems such as document management.

Information Sharing and Collaboration — At its core, SharePoint Portal Server leverages all of the collaborative capabilities that Windows SharePoint Services provides, including document and list management, discussion threads, calendars, contacts and more. These features, combined with tight integration with existing systems, can effectively provide the basic collaboration tools that teams require.

In practice, SharePoint Services provides an excellent means of organizing information for client/matter teams, both inside and outside the firm. By selectively and securely exposing content through corporate firewalls, SharePoint provides a clean, simple, cost-effective extranet solution for clients to access their information and documents. Some firms even expose content from internal systems to clients through SharePoint services or allow clients to upload documents and update information in a truly collaborative environment. Of course, having the appropriate security and auditing procedures in place are paramount to a successful extranet solution, but SharePoint's security model and tight integration with Windows security and Active Directory make this possible.

Document Management — Any overview of SharePoint should touch upon its document management capabilities. SharePoint does provide basic document management, in addition to collaboration features and moderated publishing capabilities, including the ability to create document workspaces where teams can centrally edit and discuss documents and access previous versions.

While some of these features can be used for organizing and managing documents, SharePoint falls short of many of the robust, full-featured document management systems used by mid- to large-size firms. Microsoft changed SharePoint from a tool with basic document management features to a less-functional collaborative document repository. Despite what some Microsoft marketing materials may claim, SharePoint offers below-average document management functions, including a lack of document-level security. On the other hand, SharePoint provides some document control to a broad audience. This is attractive compared to the dysfunctional manner in which most office workers share and collaborate on documents today. SharePoint is appealing to firms without a current document management system and with work that can benefit from flexible, *ad hoc* collaboration.

Developer Support — Given the pervasiveness of Microsoft technology and the wide acceptance of the .NET framework, many firms already employ technical staff skilled with Microsoft developer tools. SharePoint enables these employees by providing a robust, well-supported development environment in which they can customize and extend the capabilities of the base product.

SharePoint itself is built on the .NET framework and exposes a rich object model and API. Using this API, in-house developers can create custom Web Parts and applications on the SharePoint platform.

SharePoint Tomorrow

As part of the Microsoft Office System, SharePoint provides traditional Web-based portal support and collaborative document functionality. Microsoft aims for the portal and document management functions to work closely with its traditional Office productivity tools, messaging and collaborative functions to create a familiar, self-sufficient working environment.

As a platform for building a successful intranet or extranet portal, SharePoint offers compelling features at a very competitive price. However, as many firms have experienced, a portal is never an out-of-the-box solution. SharePoint is no exception. But it does provide a level of flexibility and support for customization that its competitors do not, making it a solid foundation and starting point.

SharePoint represents a long-term commitment from Microsoft and is positioned as a core part of its developer and server strategies. Considering that SharePoint Services is now part of the Windows Server Operating System and that the Web Part infrastructure will be built into the upcoming ASP.NET 2.0 release, there will be a significant increase in applications built on SharePoint.

It is clear that SharePoint will continue to become more infrastructure than application, which will further contribute to the interoperability between systems built on SharePoint and the number of third-party offerings that add value to a SharePoint-based solution.

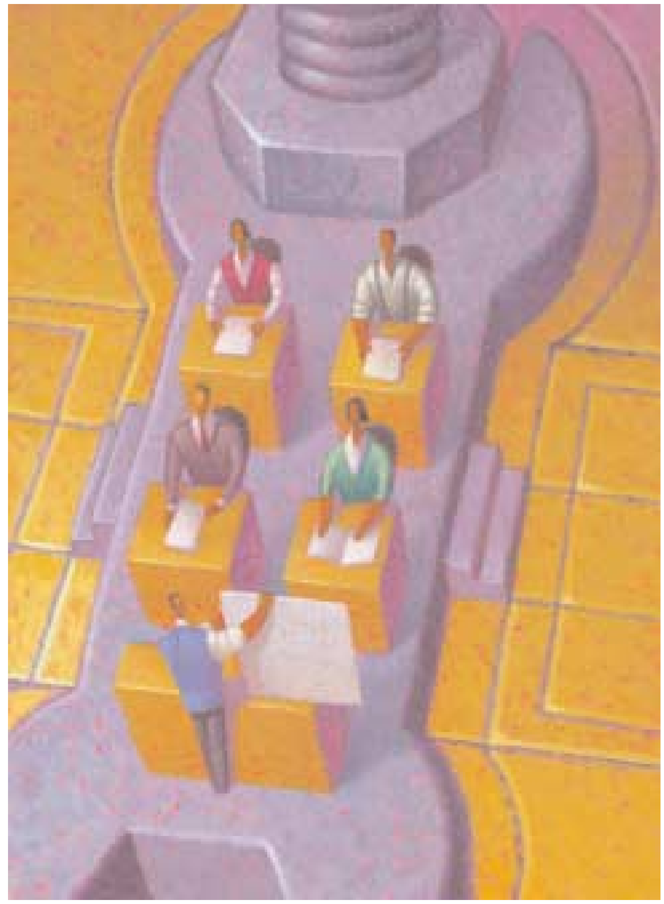
As more third-party applications and components become available, more legal software vendors will be forced to develop a co-existence strategy or look at SharePoint as a platform for their own Web-based products and solutions. Some vendors will offer simple components and add-ons for SharePoint, while others will provide entire applications using SharePoint as the "plumbing" that provides a consistent set of portal and collaboration capabilities.

Imagine having the ability to simply drag and drop components from any law firm application into a single, unified interface built around users' needs and workflow. This is what an "enterprise information portal" is all about, and what firms have been talking about. SharePoint could be the platform on which this concept becomes realized.

Integrating Intranets with IT Initiatives

by Justin Bickler and Sarah Loveland
of Advanced Legal Systems, Inc.

The explosion in Web-based applications has been fueled by concepts such as client collaboration and real-time, anywhere access to firm information for the road warrior. Client requirements have pushed Web-based technology and its implementation in law firms. IT departments need to embrace and expand intranet usage, servicing the firm's employees as their own clients. Through the use of the intranet, IT departments stand to gain accuracy, efficiency and reliability.



Technologies in Play

Build It or Buy It Out-of-the-Box?

Numerous out-of-the-box intranet products exist, and many are for legal-specific applications. A good starting point for a firm's intranet development is a product review, focusing on packages designed for use in law firms and IT departments. This process will provide you with many ideas on how the intranet can be used. During the review a general needs versus wish list should be developed. This list can be taken back to the drawing board when deciding whether to develop the intranet internally, through a consultant, or to purchase an off-the-self product that is then customized to fit the firm's requirements. Two important points to remember are: one, users must think beyond the first generation gets-us-by HTML pages that included static website links; and two, during your search, do not go looking with the idea that any of these products can be all things to all people.

Hosting

The location of the firm's intranet, extranet and/or portal is an important decision, as these forums contain business-sensitive information. Security is addressed in more detail later in this article, but at this point let's consider the network infrastructure. Strategically, a dedicated Web server is recommended based on the need to validate secure logins and maintain a high Service Level Agreement (SLA) with the end-users. The most important consideration is to isolate the intranet from business critical systems such as e-mail, accounting or case management, thus maintaining business continuity. Downtime for any of these systems needs to be independent of all other applications and services on the network. (Let's fight just one fire at a time!)

The location of the hosting platform should be determined by the location of the end-users and reliance on this service. When the primary users are located external to the firm's network, then the website should be hosted in isolation of the firm's Local Area Network (LAN) in a demilitarized zone (DMZ). When the primary users are internal, then hosting the Web services within the LAN is an efficient choice. With either hosting strategy, isolation of TCP/IP network and open ports within the firm's firewall need to be carefully considered for secure browsing and updating the content of the pages. Many intranet products will communicate with your existing database applications; requiring a constant connection to your live database environment. When the connected database is within the LAN and the website is located in a DMZ, then secure communications between the Web server and the database need to be established. Web hosting has become second-nature to most IT departments; however, once the external world is allowed to make attempts at the firm's private data, one can never be too prepared to secure the environment and lock-down any potential "back doors."

Maintenance

One issue that continues to plague intranets, extranets and public websites is change — or the lack thereof. Maintenance is notoriously difficult to sustain on these forums for several reasons. Having time to perform routine maintenance functions and providing an internal skill-set are problems that tax IT departments. But major progress has been made in Web-based software technology. The progression of Content Management Systems (CMS) has freed the maintenance of Web content from the technical realm. Even within the skills of the IT department, an in-house Web developer is rare. As a result, the intranet needs to be easy enough to maintain and expand without the need for contracting a Web developer.

Archiving data as the intranet swells with valuable information is a second, more behind-the-scenes maintenance requirement. It is important to consider this need in the early stages of planning and implementation in order to achieve an easy-to-use method for archiving outdated information.

Access and Security

When discussing access to the firm's intranet, the definition of an extranet needs to be clarified. Three terms — Internet, intranet and extratnet — are used quite loosely. The public Internet (the big cloud in the sky) and the private intranet (available only to users of the firm's LAN) are commonly understood. For the purposes of applying this technology in a law firm IT department, the extranet is defined as the hook from the outside world into the intranet.

As basic as this terminology is, it is important to clarify, as security is a vital consideration. Many levels of security are necessary to protect both the firm's network and the intranet. The IT department's security methodology must provide protection, but it must not become cumbersome to users, either IT staffers or legal professionals. Within an intranet, pass-through authentication built into the IIS Windows' Integrated Security Module streamlines login security. It enables users to gain access to each Web application using their current session's domain login information. Especially when implementing extranet capabilities, whether through a Web interface, Terminal Services (RDC) or Citrix, the firm needs to be cognizant that it is "turning the firm's systems inside out" and security is neither a simple nor a one-time initiative. Continued monitoring and auditing should be added to the daily maintenance routine. More elaborate packet filtering, third-party authentication tools and intruder alerts are a few ideas that expand the awareness of security challenges that may present themselves.

Eight Areas for Intranet Development

The concept of the intranet can be expanded and developed to aid both the IT department and the client/attorney relationship. Eight areas that deserve attention are: communication, self-service helpdesk, trouble-ticket tracking, remote assistance/administration, systems monitoring, project rollouts, staff training and new employee intake. Each of these is examined in more detail below.

1. Communication

The first and most common use of intranets is communication. Even the basic HTML intranet site has an IT page. It is likely that there are announcements regarding upcoming training classes or brown bag-lunches; however the communication is usually one-way, much like a department bulletin board. This is an excellent application of the intranet that can be taken to the next level. For example, if the intranet page is currently used to deliver information about recent virus threats, then the next step may be a link to a self-service virus removal tool. This self-help site will generate great efficiency for IT staff as well as the end-user. If half the troubleshooting occurs with a simple mouse click, the problem may be resolved before a helpdesk call is initiated.

Communication of events, schedules, IT choices and bulletins continues to be the core content of the intranet; however innovative IT staff can use it to move beyond one-way distribution of information.

2. Self-Service Helpdesk

As the example above suggests, many aspects of helpdesk support can be automated. This approach lessens the burden of basic support calls and delivers a faster first-tier response to the end-user. Other examples of self-service features that can be added to the IT department intranet include a method for end-users to apply quick fixes and hyperlinks to scripts that re-establish connections to mapped drives or printers. This immediate delivery of "fixes" provides instant user gratification.

Setting up the self-service helpdesk, then tracking user experiences can provide metrics to assist with IT planning on future implementation of scripts, drivers and group policies that can simplify and reduce end-user support requirements. Much of what the department develops over time can translate to the next workstation rollout project and vice versa. Placing troubleshooting and installation tools on the intranet empowers end-users with some first steps and delivers the IT staff real-time tools they need if the problem needs to be escalated to the next level.

3. IT Helpdesk Ticket Tracking

A myriad of helpdesk ticket software packages are available, and many other products have been developed interally by firms. It is key that a firm determine goals for a helpdesk ticket system before choosing a product to service its needs. Some firms utilize an e-mail address that receives all user requests. A delegated IT staffer then tracks incoming requests and takes action. Three limitations of this method are: a) it is labor-intensive to provide an ongoing status report to either the end-user or other IT staffers; b) base e-mail systems provide no ability to search, trend or categorize the helpdesk issues in order to categorize requests into common subjects; and c) if the user problem involves the e-mail system, this service method will be affected.

A good helpdesk trouble-ticket system provides solutions to these three limitations and many more. A user-friendly and efficient interface for end-users to enter trouble tickets is very important if the system is to be widely adopted. The knowledge gained through the ability to track, search and categorize tickets will pay off in the long run. Firmwide strategic IT decisions will be based on information that is gleaned from the tracking system, and the opportunity for positive change will be felt throughout the user community.

For example, a series of brown-bag seminars on specific issues can decrease helpdesk requests and increase efficency of both end-users and IT staff. Publication of FAQs on your intranet related to technical themes provides immediate answers to end-users who embrace the self-service concept.

With any trouble-ticket initiative the results for the end-user need to be so immediate that they are motivated to use the system rather than circumvent it. Integration with the department's intranet needs to be robust, easy to maintain and natural. From the end-user's perspective, the helpdesk ticket system may be an extension, or maybe the central purpose, of the IT department's intranet.

4. Remote Assistance/Administration

As an extension of the helpdesk trouble-ticket system, the IT staff may respond remotely to a trouble ticket rather than sending someone out to the user's location to look at the problem. A local visit is especially inconvenient when the end-user is in a remote office. The concept of remote desktop administration, end-user assistance and shadowing is not new; but the security, ease-of-use and feature-rich nature of administration tools are expanding its effectiveness. Integrating this technology into the IT department's intranet and enabling extranet capabilities will provide robust functionality whether the IT professional is working at the helpdesk or at home on-call.

An example of this functionality is the invisible Web-enabled remote control of application clients through Citrix or Terminal Services in Windows 2003 or the use of third-party remote control tools such as WebEx or VNC. If a user needs immediate assistance, the technician assigned can request the user to establish a remote session, via the website and/or hyperlinks, and "share" his/her desktop with the technician. This allows full redirection of the user's screen and application and the technician can "remote control" all aspects of the user's computer, thus resolving the issue, while educating the end-user on the diagnosis and fix. This approach can have an immediate positive impact on the end-user experience.

5. Systems Monitoring

The use of monitoring systems has also expanded greatly and is an example of another Web-enabled application that currently floats in the IT department. Integrating system status metrics and indicators with the firm's intranet and extranet combines real-time monitoring information along with warnings, alerts and notices. Systems monitoring tools combine status, troubleshooting and repair utilities into one location. Remote access or extranet capabilities complement that information by making it more accessible to IT staff when they are far from the server room.

There is also a wide variety of products developed to report, track, trend and most importantly, notify the designated technician of any changes in system status. "Big Brother," as one product is titled, delivers color-coded tables and graphs so that the systems administrator has a visual cue of current status and impending problems. Proactive notifications avoid much larger problems, but it is important that these alerts are developed and implemented as part of a more complete set of systems maintenance best practices.

6. Project Rollout Tool

The intranet's power and efficiency are impressive when used as part of the workflow to rollout workstations and software applications. Simple concepts, gathered into a single location then used as a project guide, increase deployment productivity and improve accuracy. A few illustrations of project and workstation deployment information delivered through the IT department's intranet include mapped shortcuts to the CABS file; automated software installation shortcuts; and links to scripts developed to auto-register workstation clients, join the domain and record inventory data.

Workstation rollout can also be automated to the extent that the systems administrator gathers the user's name, title and department. The rest of the workstation installation and configuration steps are completed through scripting to resources available via the IT department's intranet.

7. Staff Training

Web-enabled software training is an area that has had much success in the online realm. The popularity of webinars and online training programs on the Internet can easily be translated and integrated with the firm's intranet. Some IT departments have used the intranet as an advertising medium designed to announce training opportunities. The next step will match employee-training history and helpdesk calls to target training to specific individuals.

If the firm has remote offices, the intranet/extranet can be used to deliver online classes to a home office or to make training sessions and resources available around the clock. It can also act as a central repository of training documentation and follow-up materials. Making all of this information accessible seems logical, but most firms have not designated or engineered a storage location securely accessible via the Web and then integrated it into their workflow process. These concepts are in full use throughout other departments, but the IT area is sometimes isolated as the firm thinks about applying case management systems and document management systems. Investment and utilization within the IT department, just as with the estate planning department, makes good business sense.

8. New Employee Intake Workflow Process

Regardless of firm size, moves/adds/changes to attorneys and staff are often a surprise to the IT department. One tool that can improve communication between administration and IT is merging the IT department's intranet with the new employee intake workflow process.

The change process can encompass the basic items such as the creation or modification of the user account but also more in-depth configurations such as the group's designation, e-mail distribution lists membership and specialized folder/file security access specific for the new position. Membership to the proper technical policy object groups will auto-configure the user's workstation environment empowering them to succeed in the new position. The automation can configure printers, applications and desktop icons. When developed as part of the firm intake process, this method becomes part of the routine just like collecting the social security number and birth date and assumes that all equipment, permissions, applications and training needs are met when the new employee arrives.

With integration of this workflow process built into the firm's intranet, employees will have system logins right away and will immediately use the self-healing functions to fix their printer drivers and drive mappings the first week.

Benefits to the Firm

A well-designed intranet brings many quantifiable benefits to the firm, including IT staff efficiency, value and accuracy. The firm also gains increased attendance of training sessions and saves during infrastructure upgrade projects. Other benefits are somewhat more subjective. For example, rather than introducing users to a new application or interface that might require a learning curve, they are working through a single, familiar Web browser interface.

Another intangible benefit will come from the end-user self-service section of the IT department's intranet. This is the feeling of empowerment! The feeling of being at the mercy of technology can be overcome as users solve immediate problems with a click on a link on the intranet.

The IT department also has a valuable method of real-time information dissemination in the design of their intranet/extranet forum. This can be a powerful community builder and public relations tool during IT project rollouts, scheduled downtime and unplanned outages.

Final Thoughts

In designing the IT department's intranet, review these concepts and the function of applications designed to address your needs, gather ideas and then work to prioritize and develop the workflow processes that feed the success of the intranet. From there, look to determine who will develop the functionality you desire and incorporate the security needed to protect your investment. Remember to implement a deliberate end-user training program around the launch of the intranet/extranet and identify the resources needed to maintain the system on an ongoing basis.

The firm will benefit greatly from the implementation of these intranet concepts. The long-term benefits will begin with the next user change, user-environment decision, or as the next workstation rollout and application deployment takes place. The development, dissemination and storage of information will utilize the new intranet structure, and the department will not be developing their tool and workflow process from scratch.

Developing Business Opportunities

with Client-Specific Extranets

by Kenneth Jones of Xerdict Group LLC

Many law firms use litigation support extranets to facilitate the exchange of documents, case management information and calendars. Now more firms are starting to use extranets or portals for business development purposes. Clearly, the portal is emerging as a viable and effective tool for delivering marketing proposals and customized business development information to targeted potential clients.

Frequently, law firms win "A" clients in one or several practice groups but have difficulty breaking into other practice areas with that particular client. Let's listen in on the following fictitious exchange at a firm's monthly Executive Committee meeting.

Firm Managing Partner: *"Okay, let's discuss new client development. Bob's getting contractual work from Superior Corporation was great for the firm. Now, who's got ideas on how we might represent SuperiorCorp on their nationwide Widget litigation, since we've done great work just like this for other large corporations like SkyHigh, Inc.?"*

Chief Marketing Officer: *"Well, we've prepared and sent Superior a proposal highlighting our litigation department and the work we did winning the Anderson case for SkyHigh. And we're working with Joe (the firm's relationship partner with SuperiorCorp) to set up a meeting to review this with Superior. But with everybody so busy, it's been impossible to work out a time to meet."*

Sound familiar?

Getting a Client's Ear

In today's world, capturing a client's attention to schedule a sit-down client-marketing meeting is becoming more and more difficult. Electronic mail, wireless e-mail and mobile computing are creating a work environment in which professionals are progressively more inclined to receive information electronically, where anytime, anywhere delivery is possible.

So how can law firms overcome a client's reluctance to schedule a marketing meeting? One way is to build client portals specifically designed to disseminate a mixture of administrative and business development information to clients who are targeted as revenue expansion opportunities.

What Is a Client Portal?

Client portals are a subset of a broader class of business and general-use applications known as online collaboration products. In the legal technology world, these are commonly referred to as extranets. But whatever their name, these applications empower multiple and disparate entities and individuals to jointly post, read and share information and data on a secure Internet site.

To be most effective and to ensure the client portal will be accessed, a law firm should make available a mixture of administrative and business development data — you might call it the "carrot and stick" approach." The carrot is information that clients want or need, including client invoices, working procedures, litigation reports, document templates, phone listings for administrative employees who are not listed on a public website, etc. The electronic posting of this commonly requested information will increase the likelihood that the targeted client will access the client portal with regularity.

With the content comprising the carrot deployed, a law firm can then leverage the portal to include business development content applicable to a particular client. As an example, consider the fictitious exchange between the managing partner and chief marketing officer at the start of this article. In addition to attempting to schedule a face-to-face meeting, this firm might construct a client portal, load it with content that is of interest to the client (the carrot) and then augment this with business development information — for example, summaries of litigation victories, favorable settlement outcomes, biographies of attorneys who were responsible for these successes, litigation-related practice group newsletters, the firm's community-service events of note, upcoming training events and, perhaps, even a marketing proposal, which might specifically reference the client's corporate litigation.

So Why Is This Strategy Effective?

Consider the growth of the Internet and the change in the average person's information gathering habits and tendencies over the past several years. Many studies have documented how more of us now turn to technology-based resources, such as the Internet, to get news, manage our finances, make travel arrangements and buy goods. Perhaps these last two points are most telling: If we are willing to buy goods and services online, would we not consider business proposals online?

Given this shift in behaviors, and the demands on the time of corporate attorneys, it is certainly reasonable to believe that a portal delivering business development materials might be effective. Because in-house counsel frequently serve as both attorneys and departmental managers (often with reduced headcount and administrative support), they face an increasing amount of internally focused work (*e.g.*, attending internal meetings, satisfying internal information requests). This increased workload is in addition to the core responsibility of working with outside counsel. A corporate attorney's time, especially during core business hours, is at a premium, and it is increasingly difficult to make time for sessions focusing on process improvements, such as a law firm proposal session where a firm explains how and why it is best suited to deliver superior results and add value.

A client portal that delivers needed information to corporate attorneys can combat this time crunch and become a valuable tool in the arsenal of a corporate attorney working to meet the needs of internal clients. And, somewhat naturally, when one accesses the site to collect information of importance to the individual, he or she will be inclined to explore other information available on the portal. This is a key opportunity for a law firm to present its differentiating skills and capabilities. Within this narrow slice of time, a law firm actually has the attention of a decision-maker and the opportunity to pitch services. This electronic presentation of a firm's capabilities can, in best case scenarios, augment earlier material or presentations delivered using traditional business development methods. Or this could be the initial and perhaps only way a firm can present its capabilities.

We Have a Corporate Website — Why Do We Need a Client Portal?

There are two easy-to-comprehend business drivers in play here. The first driver is that client portals provide the capability to post customized and targeted information for clients. The second driver is that a firm's prospective clients may be more inclined to visit a client portal than a public website. Let's briefly explore each of these areas.

Customized Information

Websites, which are targeted to the general public, are by nature broad and generic. This generic content often means two things: high content volume and difficulties locating content of importance. How does this apply to client-specific marketing?

Consider attorney biographies. Can one reasonably expect a client to wade through 300+ attorney bios in an effort to find the five attorneys who might be of interest? Probably not. Or with respect to victories and successes, a firm may not have a client's permission to post a favorable result on a public website, but may have more narrow permission to cite the work on a case in the course of specific client development efforts. In these examples, and many others, the privacy and security afforded by a client portal allow firms to deliver the equivalent of a marketing "smart-bomb." The chief marketing officer can deliver prospective clients a precise amount and type of information necessary to win their business.

Both public websites and portals have useful purposes. Individuals seeking introductory information about a firm will naturally gravitate to the website as they gather information, and the website creates a first impression. Thus, it is important for a firm to have a public website that presents a polished and professional image.

That said, what would motivate an existing client to visit the public website? Perhaps curiosity, but rarely would one expect operational or business needs to result in a website visit. It is more reasonable to anticipate that an existing client might visit a client portal to pick up a requested report, look up a phone number, or find a document template.

I'm Convinced. How Do We Build This?

How does one begin building a client portal? One of your first to-do's is to take a step back and do a quick self-evaluation of the skills and capabilities of the information technology group. Some IT groups have experience developing applications; for others, the primary function and capability is the implementation and support of applications purchased from software companies. This skills and capabilities assessment, which does not have to be formal, is critical because the expertise needed to manage the implementation of externally purchased packages is fundamentally different from that used in building and constructing ground-up applications.

If this evaluation finds that a firm indeed possesses in-house development capabilities, one would then expect a software development lifecycle methodology (SDLC) and strategy to be in place. It is worthwhile to note that an SDLC should be used, to varying degrees, irrespective of a firm's decision to write the application code for the client portal system or to outsource the coding work. Regardless of who writes the code, a strong SDLC managed by a member of a law firm's IT department is a critical success factor on a portal project.

Once a methodology is selected, one typically must choose which components to apply to the project. Using all components of any SDLC for a client portal project would likely be overkill. When selecting components to use, however, all the components in the following list should be included in the process.

Key Components of the Client Portal SDLC

Define a vision and purpose for the project. It is essential that all parties (including the client and technologists) associated with the client portal project understand the organizational imperatives (goals and timing) of the effort.

Identify a "user champion." It is necessary to have high-level organizational sponsors for a software development effort. For a client portal, a firm's managing general partner, director of administration or chief marketing officer might serve in this capacity. Whoever is chosen should be charged with supporting the project conceptually to peers and should be empowered to approve project budget and deliverables.

Define the team members. Individuals need to be appointed to key project roles. They need to understand their roles and the associated time commitments. This includes both members of the client community, who meet with the technical teams to define business needs, as well as members of the technical team who fill roles such as project manager, business analyst, database analyst, system architect, developer and tester. (Note: Individuals with a technical background can fill one or many of these roles.)

Define the business requirements. Collectively, the team's business representatives (which, for a client portal, would most likely be attorneys and members of the marketing department) and technical team need to have a clear and documented understanding of the system deliverables. These must be documented so that the team members, especially those in a business function, understand and approve the project deliverables.

Write functional specifications. The technical team must develop a plan to translate the business requirements into sets of written guidelines and instructions that application programmers can work from while building the client portal. These specifications are prepared by a project manager or business analyst.

Develop a project plan. Together, the business clients and technical project manager should develop a detailed roadmap for the completion of all the aforementioned tasks, back-scheduling from a target or required completion date if necessary.

Determine the project budget/return on investment (ROI). Typically, a project manager will develop a budget for the project while clients focus on defining the ROI. The "user champion" should review and approve this budget so there is a clear understanding of the various resources allocated to the project. It is also worthwhile to develop initial estimates of project plans and budgets during the early stages of a project. These preliminary estimates help one assess the project's value. The numbers can be finalized when the project scope, approach and timing are defined.

Build/construct the application. Specific discussions on topics such as selecting database packages and programming languages, building data models, source code management, and the construction of system modules are beyond the scope of this article, but each of these items needs to be completed with the oversight of the project manager.

Quality-check the application. Providing specific comments on quality assurance is beyond the scope of this article, but the fundamentals are to develop a system test plan and to test functionality and the expected system load (numbers of concurrent users and/or large amounts of data).

We Have a Client Portal — Now What?

Once the product is completed (or perhaps earlier), many business and operational issues should be considered, primarily by attorneys and other administrative leaders within the firm. Because each firm/situation is different, we will simply cite some issues to consider without providing specific approaches or recommendations.

> ***Investment protection.*** *You spent blood, sweat and tears (not to mention, money) on your client portal; be sure you protect this investment. Consider copyrighting or trademarking your code, product name, etc.*
>
> ***Risk management.*** *You are providing a new type of service to your clients: an application. Be sure your firm is insured for this type of service and discuss the pros/cons of offering this as a law firm service or a service from a sister company or a subsidiary.*
>
> ***Operations.*** *During the rollout, training and support are needed. Attempt to estimate usage levels, and develop a plan to address these needs.*
>
> ***Marketing/branding.*** *If you choose to market the service as an additional value-added service differentiating your firm, you'll need a product name, a branding strategy, product literature, etc.*
>
> ***Data security/privacy.*** *Since this is a computer application for use with your clients, and likely will contain some type of legal or case information, be sure to consider issues and questions with respect to personal or medical information entered into a system (HIPAA), how requests for data stored in your system will be answered, etc. Also, strongly consider constructing a data privacy and security policy.*

We're Done — How Does a Client Portal Help Us?

Think back to the fictional monthly meeting at the beginning of this article. Perhaps, with a client portal, the next monthly meeting might go like this:

Firm Managing Partner: *"Let's discuss client development. I'm pleased to announce that last night Superior Corporation left me a voicemail asking us to represent them on the Widget litigation matters here in California."*

Litigation Committee Chairperson: *"That's great! But I thought we only did contractual work for them."*

Firm Managing Partner: *"This is new business! We'll need a quick response from your team. And please keep Joe in the loop, since he manages our relationship with Superior. By the way, does anyone know what prompted their call? I thought we were having problems meeting with them to discuss our services."*

Chief Marketing Officer: *"That's right; we still haven't met face-to-face. I don't know the exact reason, but I can tell you that we've been working with Joe and the finance department to post several documents containing their status reports and invoices on a client portal we recently deployed. And on the client portal, we loaded a story about the recent "Anderson" victory and the bios of the attorneys who won the case. Superior accesses our site to get their reports, so they must have looked at this material, too."*

Firm Managing Partner: *"Well, that's certainly interesting and exciting. I'm glad to hear our investment in this technology is paying off. This new business is wonderful news for the firm. Keep up the good work!"*

Using Net Technologies

for Centralized Management

by Ginny Keller of Solutions in Software, Inc.

Clients are demanding better technology and efficiency. Coordinating complex litigation is challenging, due not only to the volume of information, but also the complexity of record relationships, the number of parties involved and the variety of source applications: case management systems (CMS), document management systems (DMS), docketing, financial, and client relationship management (CRM).

Consolidating and reporting on disparate, decentralized information is time-consuming and labor-intensive. Practices are difficult to standardize among multiple firms, and inconsistencies are rampant. Dissemination of key documents and data is haphazard and difficult to assure and validate. Timeliness, relevance, context, consistency, validation and other ideal objectives are at great risk. So — how does your firm coordinate the massive volumes of information and communication required for class action, mass tort and other complex litigation?

Clearly, Net technology is a viable solution. But be aware that each option — portal, intranet, extranet — has shortcomings. The most effective system for litigation should have:

Broad accessibility, highly controllable at role and group levels;

Strong matter-centric relational structure for navigation, context and relevance;

Integration capabilities to consolidate information from source applications;

Adaptable information structure for managing and viewing information; and

Functional automation for communication and information flow.

Standard collaborative Net tools, productive in other areas of the firm, are largely inadequate for complex litigation, as they lack effective functional and relational platforms.

Effective management of complex projects or scenarios requires a valid perspective or orientation, and for litigation that's the case or matter. Relational depth is critical to move up (clients, matter types, practice groups) or down (plaintiff, history, document, claim) the relational continuum. Relating information from multiple sources, automating delivery, providing notices, easily navigating to detail — all enhance collaboration.

The Options

Of the various Net technologies, extranets and function-specific Web-based programs such as DMS are probably being used most broadly for litigation collaboration. Both are limited in the relational and functional areas and can be difficult to integrate and adapt. Web programs are generally limited in their scope by design and definition, though they can be useful components to a more complete system.

Portal development tools are allowing greater creativity, organization and security with extranet capabilities. Capabilities like depth of organization, better security and integration are all evolving. For litigation, lack of relational depth and relevant functions are still shortcomings. The matter perspective is missing, so sophisticated organization and navigation is difficult at best.

CMS is obviously a key, if not the central component. It provides the relational matter perspective that is so critical and the functional elements needed by the users. The most glaring potential shortcoming is that your CMS may not be Web-based. Since CMS is the logical point of integration, automation and functionality, creating an effective portal or extranet interface can be a serious challenge. Look at Web-based CMS with strong relational and integration capabilities.

The Result

Just as with your transactional work, harnessing the power of Net technology to centralize collaboration for litigation can save vast amounts of time while minimizing errors and inconsistency. Clients, collaborative partners, firm partners staff — all will all benefit from the enhanced organization, automation and communication of a well-implemented Web-based system for managing your firm's complex litigation.

Streamlining Business Processes

with a Company Intranet

by Vijay K. Kaushik of inetsupport, inc.

The original concept of an intranet was to provide employees a single Web-centric place for company information. However, this "Internet oasis" quickly became a set of static Web pages that housed very basic features such as firm directory, firm news, a calendar of events and some documents. It was a good concept, but because this intranet was based on a set of static HTML pages, the information inevitably got stale as the IT person responsible for maintaining it got too busy.

Over the past several years, most major software companies have created Web interfaces for their applications, and some have attempted to create a portal around their product. The biggest issue with intranet applications is they are extremely product-centric, providing little, if any, access to other applications in the firm. But as major portal players in the industry start supporting webparts or portlets to access other applications, we are moving closer to the original intent of providing a single Web-centric place for company information. The intranet/portal has finally come full circle.

As you consider the different options for your firm's intranet, here are some important considerations:

Published information should be easy to edit and update.

Users should not be required to learn HTML, ASP, Java, .NET, etc.

It should be easy to integrate existing applications and databases.

It must be based on open technologies with ample third-party support.

Intranet management and updates should be distributed across departments.

You should have a built-in workflow engine and ability to integrate existing business processes.

Using these guidelines, you should be able to implement an intranet that gives users access to most of your applications, while simplifying the day-to-day upkeep of the intranet. Further, as part of your implementation planning, make a list of applications and tools that should be available to your users through the intranet. Data from human resources, accounting systems, records management systems and document management systems can be published on the intranet.

One of the ultimate goals for the company intranet should be to replace manual paper-based processes with Web-based workflows. By making these processes available online, users have instant access to up-to-date forms and data. The forms will be imported and their data routed via workflows. With each automated form, the firm is able to leverage data from other applications, saving time and minimizing errors. Administration is improved because the approval requests can be routed using workflow engines.

To get an idea of which manual forms and procedures you can automate to the intranet, take a "field trip" around the office. Look for the paper-intensive processes that could be streamlined by turning them into online Web fill-ins, which can easily be routed to appropriate personnel or systems. Additionally, meetings with department heads and users will help in getting their buy-in and discovering tedious and inefficient methods that can be automated and streamlined.

Your first stop should be the accounting department to check out the supply of printed forms. These include check requests and expense reports, which can be made into online forms. Other forms or processes that could be made available online include client account inquires, new matter intake processes, time tracking, W-2s, I-9s and other forms used in human resources.

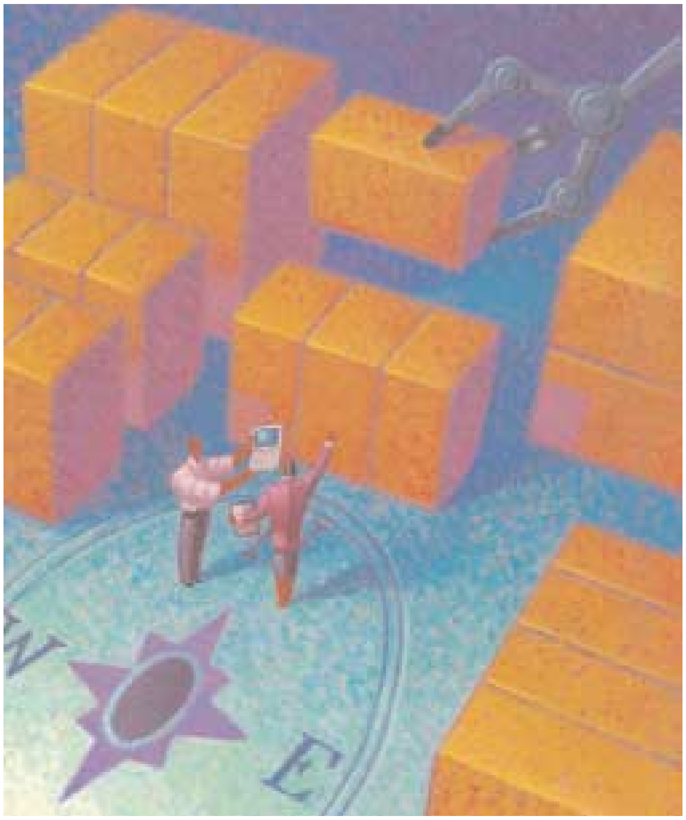
During your tour of the office, give careful consideration to how each department does its job. Some forms may not exist in a general forms folder in the department; they may be internal functions in each department that could be streamlined by using workflows.

In conclusion, your intranet should be easy to update and manage, and it should simplify your internal business processes. Moreover, by adding appropriate security, the information can be made available to clients through the company extranet. Investing time in the planning and design stages will ensure that your intranet becomes the single Web-centric place for company information.

Comprehensive Content Management

Using Intranets, Extranets and Portals

by Shannon McMahon of Interwoven



Competitive pressures, firm consolidations and changes in client expectations have made it essential for attorneys to collaborate effectively across distance, internally and externally. The underlying business challenge for law firms is to find an easy, cost-effective way for attorneys to access and share critical information and best practices in a growing distributed environment, while providing partners comprehensive visibility into the firm's matters. Additionally, there is a need for tools that enable opportunities for increased revenues by cross-selling services, building high-value practice areas and creating more profitable client relationships.

Corporate and government legal departments have their own set of challenges. Tight budgets mandate vigilance in controlling large costs such as outside legal fees and discovery requests. Without the appropriate tools, in-house counsel wastes precious resources searching for precedents, logging onto extranets of various outside counsel, shipping documents and chasing down contract revisions in e-mail attachments. This article discusses how enterprise content management (ECM) provides a strategy for managing all critical business content.

Document Management Is Evolving

Many firms have already taken the first step toward making better use of technology by embracing basic document management (DM). However, DM is evolving beyond simple dynamic records and work in progress. Changing work practices, regulatory requirements and accountability have put greater demand on DM systems to provide a more intuitive organizational structure. These systems also need the ability to incorporate multiple forms of content, including voicemail, images and e-mail.

Basic DM systems are not designed to provide a platform for knowledge management and collaboration. Sharing information externally becomes cumbersome and requires replication of information. The simple act of storing content requires users to enter document profile forms, making it difficult to capture the rich metadata needed for teams to easily locate and leverage relevant information. The shortcomings of traditional DM systems become even more apparent in light of recent trends:

Multi-geographic collaboration *— In response to the desire of clients for more efficient nationwide legal service, many firms now operate practice groups that span multiple locations. However, the inability to share content effectively across distance hampers collaboration and prevents these groups from functioning as unified organizations.*

E-mail overload *— The rise of e-mail messaging as the primary form of communication has made e-mail management increasingly urgent. Overlapping threads and duplicate attachments overwhelm local hard drives, servers and network capacity, as well as the attorneys themselves. Meanwhile, the increasing amount of vital content contained in local e-mail folders remains unsearchable and inaccessible to others in the firm.*

__Extranet access__ — The Internet has created the expectation of self-service information access. For clients, this means the ability to access content pertaining to their legal matters directly via the extranet without having to call someone at the firm for help.

DM systems also tend to be poorly suited for the specific requirements of records management (RM), which plays an increasingly vital role in helping firms and legal departments reduce risk, reduce the cost of storing paper files, improve business continuity and facilitate regulatory compliance. A truly comprehensive technology strategy demands that all content be managed in a consistent way within the same system throughout the content lifecycle, including work in progress, finished documents and e-mail, whether the matter is active or closed.

A Complete Solution

Enterprise content management (ECM) goes beyond DM to provide a strategy for managing all critical business content and the processes around it. As a comprehensive technology, ECM addresses a broad range of business needs, including:

A unified approach to managing scanned images, documents, voicemail and e-mail throughout the matter lifecycle, including version control, security, check in/check out, e-mail management and records retention and destruction

Leveraging intranets, extranets and portals to provide customized views of information

A matter-centric view of content, rather than a view that is distributed among multiple applications, to help manage matters more effectively

Exposing the matter-centric view to the client to create real-time customer service capability and improve client satisfaction

Although it incorporates document management (DM) functionality, ECM differs from DM in several important respects:

ECM allows unified search across all forms of content — including documents and e-mail — via full text and metadata.

ECM encompasses both dynamic (work in progress) and static (locked) records management.

ECM includes robust security at the client, matter, folder and document level to support internal process controls and enable secure access for external parties.

ECM exposes all content in the repository via desktop clients, intranets, extranets and a portal interface.

By bringing together all of a firm's content and content-related processes into a single platform, ECM provides a foundation that enables the firm or legal department to reduce costs, reduce risk and improve productivity. But how do you ensure adoption? Moreover, how do you control access to information? You need an architecture that makes it easy to navigate and enables implementation of access control at the matter, folder and object level.

Matter-Centricity Makes It Work

The matter file is central to a lawyer's daily activities, serving as both a record and an ongoing resource for all client work. Traditionally, law firms placed all documents pertaining to a given matter in an expandable file such as a Redweld. Inside, content was further organized in manila folders into such categories as correspondence, pleadings, attorneys' notes and interoffice memoranda, including both documents authored internally and those received from other parties. On the outside of the Redweld would be written such information as the client's name, current matter, client-matter number, date opened, originating attorney and other identifying data.

Although its impact is far-reaching, matter-centricity is built on a simple premise: creating an electronic version of the matter file folder. A matter-centric architecture provides electronic workspaces — or "virtual Redwelds" — that contain folders and subfolders to further organize content. Metadata that would be written on the outside of the physical file is entered into a matter profile form and is applied to every item that is filed in that electronic matter file, virtually eliminating the need to manually enter profile information for each individual document being stored. The result is an electronic matter file that enables attorneys to work the way they are used to working, and laying the groundwork for supporting the evolving client and business demands.

Achieving Geographic Transparency

Matter-centric collaboration is the next step in the evolution of legal industry information technology, combining core DM functionality with rich new collaboration capabilities. Matter-centric collaboration is ideally suited to the practice-centric structures currently being adopted by many firms. Practice groups spanning multiple offices are given the ability to collaborate seamlessly around content to operate as a single entity, with a centralized practice repository that enables any member to access, via the Internet, intranet, extranet or portal, any document or matter file from any location. Access can be controlled at the matter, folder or individual object level, providing ethical walls within the firm, and enabling firms and legal departments to grant fine-tuned access to clients and other external parties.

The firm's full resources and expertise in a given practice area are available globally, regardless of the attorney's location. This helps the firm provide worldwide service to its clients and compete effectively for a broader range of new business opportunities. By providing a unified platform for intranet and extranet access, matter-centric collaboration enables firms to meet client demand for direct, self-service access to matter information, and work efficiently with in-house legal counsel as a single virtual organization.

Intranet and portal interfaces enable the firm to create customized workspaces or team rooms for many-to-many collaboration on matters, or on law department tasks such as contract negotiations and mergers and acquisitions. The collaborative team room, or specified documents within the team workspace, can be exposed to external parties, enabling them to view or edit documents, retaining the audit trail and version control that are lost when e-mail is used to send revisions back and forth.

The Right Interface Makes the Difference

The ECM system provides a number of interfaces that enable users to access the system in the way that makes them the most productive. Internally, they may choose to use a desktop interface that is integrated with their e-mail client or productivity tools, or they may opt to use a browser-based interface that provides a portal view into the system. Regardless of the interface they use, team members have access to the same information repository, enabling collaboration across geographies.

The browser and portal views can be extended to clients and outside resources such as investigators and experts, enabling the entire virtual team to function as a unified organization. Legal departments can grant access to share files with outside counsel via the extranet, reducing the need to request information via e-mail or telephone. The ability to access information via intranets, extranets and portals enables firms to work more productively, build closer relationships with clients, and share information and best practices globally.

A Consolidated View of All Matter Information

The portal view provides a matter dashboard that can include project roll-up views, including task lists and discussion thread topics to help manage critical dates and resolve issues in a centralized location. Task lists can be created to assign tasks, priorities, status, timelines or due dates to any member of the team. Team members can be notified automatically when tasks are assigned or due and report progress against key milestones. Discussion boards enable team members to post messages, view replies and follow discussion threads, all within the same, searchable ECM repository with the rest of the matter information. Users can request e-mail notification when a response is posted to a discussion thread.

A portal view also provides a secure consolidated view of business content from multiple sources and applications. By aggregating information from time and billing systems, matter management, business intelligence, news feeds and Web content, users have quick and easy access to all relevant content from a single portal page. This saves time, increases overall productivity and enables decisions that are more informed. Users are able to conduct sophisticated concept searches across all repositories and get a personalized view of all pertinent information via the portal page.

Enable Self Service

The expectation for self-service access to online content has increased among both clients and the professionals that serve them. An ECM system enables firms to address all extranet and intranet needs with a single system by providing a security model that supports both internal and external users within the same workspace. Firms can deploy a broad range of content accessible only by internal users, including administrative pages, practice pages, matter-specific pages and pure Web content. In a corporate or government legal department, this self-service model greatly reduces the time spent responding to individual requests for information, freeing the attorneys to work on more important projects.

Build Virtual Practice Areas and Communities

Law firms need solutions that scale beyond document management and enable them to reach new levels of productivity and customer service. Providing a portal view into the ECM enables law firms and law departments to create practice-area workspaces where they can securely review, share and discuss issues affecting their specific practice area with attorneys in different offices. Communities identify interesting events, such as seminars, relating to specific practice areas. Organizations become more "intelligent" by delivering knowledge and expertise to the entire enterprise on demand.

Increased Revenue Opportunities

The Internet collapses the distance between legal services sellers and buyers, who likewise expect more collaboration. Internet technology allows firms to globalize their presence and compete for business with local firms in distant locations Time sensitivity has increased and firms need to be able to respond to their clients more quickly. In addition, clients may shop for the best price. Intranet, extranet and portal technology can be used to differentiate a firm from competitors.

From the client's perspective, a secure extranet provides a means to easily ask and get answers to any number of questions. All the questions and answers can be archived in a searchable knowledgebase. Interested parties can keep track of questions as well as the responses. When clients are comfortable with a firm's extranet, they are more likely to stay with the firm based on their familiarity with its technology.

Helping In-House Counsel Control Costs

In-house counsel interact with large numbers of outside law firms on thousands of matters, resulting in an abundance of information distributed across a large number of systems. An ECM system enables creation of a secure extranet where outside counsel can post all information related to a specific matter, eliminating the need to request files via phone or e-mail, or to log in and out of various firms' extranets. By requiring outside counsel to post their work product to the workspace within an organization, legal departments gain unprecedented visibility across all matters and all firms being managed by the group.

Compliance Issues

A secure extranet enables a corporate secretary to ensure that, for example, directors receive materials when they need them, and provides a legally defensible audit trail of decisions that are made. Corporate secretaries can manage directors' activities by posting calendars, meeting minutes and key documents in a secure workspace. Communication to and among board members can be conducted (and recorded) centrally instead of via redundant e-mail messages and phone calls. Similar workspaces can also provide an electronic equivalent to the corporate minute book.

Implementation of an ECM system enables creation of a secure extranet that promotes self-service and enables corporate counsel to respond efficiently to information requests by regulators, ensure that the company is in compliance and reduce the personal liability of the company's officers. With centralized record keeping, the board of directors and corporate secretary gain complete knowledge and accounting of all information presented and decisions made. This same scenario can be applied to committee meetings in government legal departments.

Conclusion

Law firms and law departments can no longer afford to rely on outdated methods for matter filing and storage. Matter-centric collaboration builds on established practices, while bringing all of a firm's content into an electronic context and surrounding it with rich collaborative functionality. Powerful, yet simple to adopt, ECM and matter-centricity give users intuitive access to the information they need in the course of their daily work, while laying the foundation for essential IT initiatives. As paper filing systems fall short in today's fast-paced and distributed world, matter-centric ECM represents a new paradigm for legal technology and a model for the efficient practice of law.

Portal Provisioning

Managing User Accounts and Matter Workspaces

by Jerry Askew, ILTA Associate Member

Provisioning — the process of creating and managing user accounts and matter workspaces — is an important consideration in developing a portal or extranet strategy for your firm. Reliable and consistent provisioning is necessary if the portal is to become a valued part of your firm's service offerings.

IT managers need to have a solid understanding of the provisioning strategy, and equally important, so do attorneys and legal assistants. In the surreal world of the extranet, attorneys and paralegals are the *de facto* helpdesk for the firm's clients. Instilling in them the necessary knowledge and proper expectations will go a long way toward making the portal a success.

Many portals include mechanisms to automatically create new matter workspaces. Scheduled exports from your accounting system, typically performed nightly, can provide the necessary data. Workspace templates, if available, help ensure that new matter workspaces are properly configured with respect to a given type of matter. Without this capability, additional configuration may be necessary before a workspace can be made available. In either case, you may benefit from augmenting the bundled capabilities with your own automation, especially if you wish to customize the workspace based on matter type or client preferences.

User account information may be maintained by the portal application itself or derived from another source. In the latter case, user accounts are typically held in Active Directory or in a companion application such as a document or case management system.

Portals that rely on Active Directory or DMS/CMS for user administration will typically service internal users right out-of-the-box. External user accounts, however, must still be created and managed. Whether in Active Directory or DMS/CMS, these user accounts will have significance beyond the portal application and must be managed accordingly. Add to this the specter of teaching an end-user to set up accounts in the Microsoft Management Console, and you will not be surprised that the responsibility for managing client accounts likely will fall to the IT department.

On the other hand, portals with a self-contained user administration system can usually be managed by a legal assistant, alleviating the need for daily IT involvement. In the self-contained system both internal and external user accounts must be managed. IT can add value in this situation by including the portal in the standard new-user and departing-user processes (hopefully, automated ones).

In either case, external user accounts must be managed; automating the provisioning process will ease this burden significantly. Typical sources for external account data include CRM systems and case management systems, as well as basic contact management applications such as Outlook. With automated provisioning, attorneys can conceivably grant or revoke portal access by simply checking a box in a contact record. Policies expressed through the automatic provisioning script ensure that the resulting account is set up and managed according to your firm's standards.

Above all else, the automation process must be well-defined and documented, and a number of tools are helpful to achieve this goal. Simple data transfer can be done with Microsoft DTS (Data Transformation Services). More complex tasks can be handled by VB Script, PERL or other scripting languages. Real-time provisioning can be accomplished with the help of user-driven workflow systems such as Metastorm, or by integrating existing applications using systems such as the Tsunami integration and data sharing appliance.

Regardless of the kind of portal you ultimately choose to implement, proper automation of the provisioning process will help lower the portal's operating costs and keep your attorneys and the firm's clients happy.

Resources

Microsoft DTS: www.microsoft.com/sql/evaluation/features/datatran.asp

PERL scripting language: www.perl.org/

Metastorm: www.metastorm.com/products/pla.asp

Tsunami Software: www.tsusoft.com/

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International Legal Technology Association

2110 Slaughter Lane, #115
PMB 149
Austin, Texas 78748

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