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ICLEF INDIANA CONTINUING LEGAL EDUCATION FORUM

PRACTICE MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

Installing Practice / Case management software is absolutely nothing like installing a program like Microsoft Office. It is very complicated, a lot of customization will be involved and you're likely to link it with at least two other programs you're already using (like an accounting program, Microsoft Word and Outlook). None of that is easy, even if you read the 600 page manual that comes with the program. So here are some thing to keep in mind.

DON'T EXPECT A PERFECT FIT

As you can see above, there are a lot of choices here (the above is only a small subset of everything out there). The sales department of each manufacturer will likely tell you that their program is the best one out there. The reality is that it's extraordinarily unlikely that any program will do everything you want exactly the way you want. All of the major players can be customized significantly and it's likely that you can get a program to do about ninety to ninety five percent of what you want, the way you want. In spite of that, it's still worth pursuing and the benefits of a properly implemented Practice Management Program are enormous.

QUESTIONS TO ANSWER BEFOREHAND

WHAT PROBLEMS ARE YOU TRYING TO ADDRESS

If you're considering a Practice Management Program, then you probably already have a list of issues that you'd like to take care of. Write them down.

WHAT FUNCTIONALITY WOULD YOU LIKE TO GAIN?

Read through the list of functions that Practice Management Programs provide above (paragraph V.B. above) and write down the features you would like to take advantage of. Sometimes reading about what you could have helps you determine what you need.

PLANNING TO GROW?

If you plan on adding more employees or partners, you need a system that can grow with you.

REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

One of the big advantages Practice Management Programs give you is the ability to run reports about your practice. For example, if you're in litigation, it would be nice to see a report of all upcoming statutes of limitation. If you're a probate attorney, you might want to see a list of all upcoming due dates for all probate matters (dates that things need to be filed like inventory & appraisals, fiduciary accountings, estate tax returns, etc.). So think about this in advance and make a list of reports you absolutely need and any that would be otherwise useful. Also include in your list the pieces of information you want in each report.

INFORMATION YOU SHOULD GATHER BEFOREHAND

INVENTORY OTHER PROGRAMS AND DEVICES YOU PLAN TO CONTINUE USING

For example, you want your new Practice Management Program to work with what you already own, so write down all of the names, versions/editions of existing software or devices. Very importantly, you need to identify:

- Word processor(s)
- Email applications
- Accounting program(s)
- Document assembly software (if any)
- Document management applications (if any)
- Scanning software (Adobe Acrobat, PaperPort, etc.)
- Smartphones you would like to synchronize with the system

INVENTORY HARDWARE & NETWORK

Here are some other pieces of information you'll need.

NETWORK TYPE

Do you have a server-based network (Windows or other network operating system running on a dedicated computer); or do you have a peer-to-peer network where individual user computers are connected so you can share files or Internet access, but there is no true server.

LOG-INS AND PASSWORDS

Software will need to be installed on your server (if you have one) and all connected computers. Therefore, the person who handles the installation will need to know the login and password for each computer (including the server).

DESKTOP/NOTEBOOK COMPUTER SPECS

Age, specs and operating system for every computer in your office. If you have a Windows computer and would like to know its specific configuration, you can use free applications like Belarc Advisor (https://www.belarc.com/products_belarc_advisor) to produce a configuration report.

WIRED OR WIRELESS

Is your network wired, wireless or both. If you're using both, how is the wireless connection being used?

ANTIVIRUS

What brand and version of antivirus software are you running?

REMOTE ACCESS

If you have more than one office or want to work from more than one location (say home and office), what type of connection exists between the two places? How to you gain remote access? For example, are you using a VPN, terminal services, Citrix, GoToMyPC, etc.?

EXCHANGE

Do you have access to Microsoft Exchange? Exchange could be running on your server or you could be renting it in the form of "hosted Exchange."

BACK UP

You'll need details about how your backup system works (tape, hard drive, Internet, type of backup software being used, etc.).

DATA IMPORT

You never want to start out with an empty Practice Management Program if you already have case information entered into another program. For example, you might have all of your current clients in Timeslips (a billing program) and your electronic rolodex is in Outlook. You would want all of your cases and contacts imported into the Practice Management Program you're considering so you can hit the ground running. You want to make sure that anyone you work with on a Practice Management Program implementation is aware of these facts well in advance.

PRACTICE INFORMATION

The following information will be relevant for customizing a Practice Management Program for your practice. You can save yourself some time by compiling this information now.

USERS IN YOUR OFFICE

How many lawyers, paralegals, legal secretaries/assistants, law clerks and other support staff do you have? Are they located in one physical office or are they spread across multiple offices? Do you have anyone who works from home?

CASE/FILE TYPES

Types of cases you handle - for example, Estate Planning, Real Estate, Probate, etc. It's fine to have a "miscellaneous" option as well.

PARTY TYPES

Parties are people or entities involved in a case and they're specific to the type of case. For example, in a probate matter, I have decedent, fiduciary(ies), Judge, heirs/beneficiaries, and the like. If it were an entity formation (say a new corporation), then I might have shareholders, directors, officers, and an incorporator. In a litigation matter, I might have opposing counsel, plaintiff, defendant, witnesses, insurance agent, judge, etc.

CASE INFORMATION

For each type of case, compile a short list of information that you need quick access to. For example, in a Probate matter, you might want to know 1) date of death, 2) social security number of the decedent, 3) testate or intestate, 4) county of domicile, 5) probate court case number, 6) fiduciary's name and contact information, etc.

CONTACT GROUPS

A "contact" is any person or entity that you deal with. If you were to go through your rolodex of contacts (names, numbers and addresses), what groups would you use to classify those contacts? Of course, many of the group designations may apply to a single contact. For example, you might have clients, judges, lawyers, friends, co-workers, etc.

CAUTION ABOUT CUSTOMIZATION

Most people initially believe that customization is one of the most important features of a Practice Management Program. Of course, the program must be customized to your practice and the irrelevant pre-customizations that may come with the program out of the box need to be deleted. In other words, if you do not handle real estate matters at all, then you don't want "Real Estate Transaction" as a file type although it may have been included with the initial installation. Where some firms go overboard is with "custom fields." For example, if I handle estate planning, I may be able to set up additional data fields within an estate planning file where I could enter hundreds of pieces of information about each client. The reality is that this is massive overkill, and most firms end up never entering anything into all of those little fields they set up; and those who actually do enter data in all of those fields end up with an enormous, unwieldy database. Custom fields should be used for information you frequently have to look up; answers to questions which often require you to locate the physical file in order to answer. Do you need a custom field in order to look up who a client chose as their second successor co-agent in their financial power of attorney? Probably not. Therefore, those kinds of things are a bad use of custom fields.

SHOULD YOU DO IT YOURSELF?

Practice Management Program programs are complex and you can read every single page of the end-user's manual that comes with the program and still only know 25% of what you need to know in order to successfully install, customize and integrate the Practice Management Program. If it were easy, everyone would have one. Don't be misled into thinking that installing a Practice Management Program is akin to installing Microsoft Office. If installing Microsoft Office is analogous to installing a small air-conditioner in your bedroom window; then installing a Practice Management Program is analogous to installing a new central air conditioning system in your whole house, including all new duct work.

BE PATIENT

A successful roll-out takes time. Don't rush it. If implementation needs to be rushed due to some external factors, you're probably better off waiting.

ESTABLISH A SCHEDULE

If you're retaining a firm to handle your installation, integration, data import and training, ask for a specific schedule for when each item is to occur. If the consultant can't give you any ideas, then they probably don't have enough experience to be in charge of your project.

TRAINING

The training should be a significant portion of the budget. If you don't want to spend the money on training, then you need to abandon the idea of setting up a Practice Management Program because you're wasting your money. I believe that the training must be hands-on (everyone has a computer to follow along on) and don't be surprised if it takes 6 to 8 hours for each person to get up to speed.

ONGOING MAINTENANCE

All Practice Management Programs offer some period of free technical support with their program which may or may not be that useful. More and more of them are requiring that you sign a "maintenance contract" which typically gets you technical support and all upgrades during the maintenance period. Therefore, you need to take those maintenance costs into consideration when doing projections for total cost over a period of years. Find out the details about the included tech support and also what your consultant offers. Since the firm that set up your system already knows all of the particulars, how you're configured and what other programs you've integrated, an issue that takes an hour to resolve with the free tech support may take only 5 minutes with the consultant. Therefore, it may be worth your time to pay for fast and efficient tech support from a consultant even though you have also paid for a "maintenance" contract with the software manufacturer.