

Customised case systems

An agile business usually features effective and highly integrated business systems that are used by everyone in the firm. **Paul Wyatt** insists there is no scope for islands of information or isolated business processes

It was not very long ago that 'case management' was the word on the street with a plethora of legal suppliers touting their wares. Some systems were very workflow intensive, offering comprehensive process based systems to typically handle low-value, high-volume work. First it was debt recovery, then conveyancing during the property boom and most recently personal injury systems, fuelled by much TV advertising. Whatever the economic climate, there will always be work that can be de-skilled, automated and subsequently pigeonholed into a case management system.

But what about all of the other work that traditionally has been difficult if not impossible to automate effectively using a case management system? Changes in regulation, increased professional indemnity premiums and the demand for third-party access to files via the internet are just some of the factors that are causing many firms to consider a case management approach for these high-value work types. However, the typical working practices of lawyers involved in this type of work are not well supported by traditional case management solutions. While these systems can be very effective in ensuring that file opening and money laundering processes are completed properly, they do not support the working styles and needs of knowledge workers.

In most of the large law firms the majority of employees are concerned with managing a relatively small number of high-value cases. Their key asset is their knowledge and understanding of legal precedent and implication; indeed I will refer to them as 'knowledge lawyers'. Case management applications have been written for 'process lawyers' where success comes from completing transactions as quickly and cheaply as possible. They were designed to de-skill and automate processes, saving time and the need for legal expertise.

The needs of 'knowledge lawyers' are very different. While these people use tools such

as e-mail, word processors, spreadsheets and document management systems, they are not accustomed to working in a system where their actions are regulated and their work held in structured and probably public formats. Their time is precious and they cannot be bullied into using inappropriate systems for the greater good of the firm. The term 'case management' or any associated term can immediately bring resistance from such users. Non-process lawyers rely heavily on their e-mail and calendaring software and close integration with this is essential. The preferred approach is to actually embed the 'matter' or 'file' management software within their e-mail software, giving fast and easy access to their files and tools to help them create documents.

Regardless of the type of work undertaken, what users are demanding are intuitive systems which assist in the purposes of compliance, risk management and file management without imposing major changes to their natural working practices. As well as a familiar interface, tight integration with document management is essential in order to support the document life cycle (especially e-mail documents) enabling better communication, internal and external, and making sure all events are recorded appropriately. A business can only be agile if it has good communications in place, and that really means effective and highly integrated business systems that are used by everyone in the firm. There is no scope for islands of information or isolated business processes.

The challenge for any such system (for the purpose of this document we will refer to them as 'matter management' in contrast to 'case management' systems) is to reflect these working practices and yet provide underlying structures that ensure compliance with internal procedures.

There is a general call that both case and matter management systems should provide the ability to tie together other strategic applications such as finance, CRM, document management and e-mail

and offer an instant return on investment.

The IT departments within larger professional service organisations (such as top 50 law firms) are seeking tools to help them construct such business solutions. They have substantial development resources able to program at a much lower level than users of traditional level case management applications. They demand standards-based tools that are highly flexible and granular, effectively providing a framework and some core functionality while they add their unique business process using industry standard toolsets such as Microsoft Visual Studio.

The resulting systems are highly stylised to their own specific needs, probably extending as extranet applications. They become an important cultural and marketing statement for the organisation.

To really address this opportunity case management suppliers have to make significant adjustments not only to their products, but also to their thinking. Suppliers are trying to enter a new market dealing with a new sort of user; the knowledge lawyer, and these users do not take kindly to being 'systemised'. To be successful, suppliers must reconsider some of the basic features and terms that they advocate so strongly in the case management world.

Where they de-skilled they must enable, where they instructed they must inform, where they replaced they must enhance and where they tried to provide the single all encompassing solution they must embrace a wide range of other technologies and suppliers.

So, is this the end of case management systems as we know them? Is matter management or knowledge management the way forward? Only time will tell; but what we can be sure of is that any system, regardless of its title, must be easier to use than not and has to provide a better working environment for the user whilst maximising profits for the firm.

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The UK's leading supplier of case and matter management systems with over 20,000 users

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USING CMS TECHNOLOGY IN NEW AND INNOVATIVE WAYS

Cardiff-based Hugh James has had a long standing relationship with Visualfiles Limited. As SolCase users for many years, it has reaped the benefits of a traditional case management system for procedural, workflow driven areas such as debt recovery.

With the launch of Visualfiles, the next generation of SolCase, Hugh James seized the opportunity to implement it as its matter management system. According to Alun Jones (partner, Hugh James) there were four main drivers for this technology decision which included:

- CRM. While SolCase was excellent for generating client information within a certain application, Visualfiles' new entity relationship model provided the ability to view all cases relating to a particular client across the firm and across all work types. Hugh James can now collate, profile and share client information firm-wide in an electronic format from one central database. This sharing of knowledge not only enhanced client care but also provided many cross-selling opportunities.
- Risk management. Hugh James was seeing an increased burden of administration on fee earners in areas such as file inception, money laundering checks and the generation and more importantly tracking of terms of business. With Visualfiles

as its matter management system, it can impose a minimum service standard. A client knows that regardless of case type, they can expect the same service standards will be adhered to. Matter management means they can control the file at crucial stages and at stages of increased risk such as file inception and file closing. It also means they can impose standard business processes — for example a case plan is prepared within five days on all litigation cases.

- Enhanced levels of client service. Hugh James has been able to introduce an 'agreed billing profile'. It offers its clients the option to select how they would like to pay. For example, if the client selects that they would like to be billed at each £150 stage, then integration with SOS's practice manager means that the to do list is updated and the bill issued at each £150 stage.
- Improved cash flow. Taking the above example, if the client can specify how they wish to pay, then the chances are high that once the bill is issued, the client will pay.

Jones sums up: "With the rollout of matter management well under way, the next 12 months will see it implemented firm wide and with the possibility of upgrading to Visualfiles M2, an exciting time lies ahead, one which should see us streets ahead of the competition."

A COMMON-SENSE SYSTEM

Involved in the development of M2 with Visualfiles Limited from the outset, Beachcroft Wansbroughs, one of the largest commercial law firms in the country, was clear in its objectives, which included its need to:

- create a culture of compliance via a common system, achieving standardisation and the enhancement of consistent methods;
- ensure legislative compliance;
- provide fee earners who only work in Microsoft Outlook with an easy to use, non-intrusive system, using their own familiar environment;
- introduce a system which would facilitate e-mail and document management;
- extend this system to full case management.
- be able to integrate the new system with their existing practice management system;
- make it easier to pass both internal and external audits;
- continue to develop as a progressive employer and deliver a consistent service to clients.

Jeffrey Ng, information director, said: "M2 ticked all the right boxes for us. It will provide a common fee earner support system to satisfy a number of key requirements."

He added: "With M2, we will get a quality system to help real lawyers. It is the right tool to easily match all of our requirements."

BROWNE JACOBSON PROVE THE CASE FOR MATTER MANAGEMENT

In 2003, Browne Jacobson needed a matter management solution for higher value, lower volume and non-contentious work types. It had to include comprehensive document management, time recording, cost estimates and alerts, automated billing, digital dictation, intelligent document assembly, precedent libraries, contact directories and system-assisted processes.

Using its existing SolCase case management system, in-house developed extensions were written in Visual Basic to integrate with Outlook and Firmware. The development was sympathetic to the fact that not all work types can be workflow driven and that there are elements of administration, quality control and procedure which do lend themselves to system support and are common to virtually all work types. The system-supported process fragments rather than an end-to-end process, reducing the commonly perceived 'threat' in terms of automation often felt by lawyers and providing them with functionality, which delivers benefit that they can immediately identify with.

Benefits of the system were measured as follows:

- aspects of fee earner productivity increased by up to 74%;
- aspects of secretarial efficiency increased by 222%;
- lawyer to secretary ratio increased from 1.7 lawyers per secretary to 2.13;
- measurably increased the accuracy of time recording.

With such fantastic results, the case for matter management was made. In December 2004, Browne Jacobson chose Visualfiles' M2 for firm wide rollout. Jonathan Swan, IT director, Browne Jacobson, said: "Building on the experience and credentials of Visualfiles within this sector, for us Visualfiles M2 represented a mature and well-developed offering having the full set of attributes necessary to deploy matter-centric solutions across the firm."

Browne Jacobson's goal was to extend such benefits to those aspects of the legal process which apply across the board, irrespective of

work type. Such areas include ensuring compliance with regulations, managing risks, building client care and quality control into the process — not to mention achieving substantial efficiency savings!

Jonathan continued: "Embedded in Microsoft Outlook, out-of-the-box M2 provides a practical solution to the current issues and challenges in terms of e-mail management and in this respect it will be a success because it works, quite simply, in the way lawyers need and expect it to.

"With regard to CRM systems, it is my view that content is king, and through integration between best of breed systems, M2 and Inter-Action provide a rich seam of contact information which is being gathered as part of the process of doing work. Contact, relationship and activity information can all be harvested without a lawyer or secretary having to stop and think about systems, such is the integrated nature of the work management processes developed under M2."



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