

Choosing a Case Management Tool

Before evaluating the merits of various case management programs, you need to decide what it is that you want them to do. Or ask the even more basic question: why do I need case management at all if I have Outlook for e-mail, calendaring, scheduling and contact lists?

The short answer to this is that programs such as Outlook are typically designed around individuals (contacts) and a single person's schedule (yours). They are at best ill-suited for group use. Case management programs such as Abacus, Amicus or Time Matters are generally *matter centric*. All information: contacts, e-mails, appointments, To Do's, time spent on a file, documents, etc. are related to a particular matter, case, project, client, etc. This means that when it comes time to generate a chron list or refer to events concerning a matter, the computer has all the information you need without consulting the physical file. This drastically reduces the number of times you have to say "let me check the file" in response to a client's question: all your file information is at your fingertips on the computer. This saves you substantial amounts of time and makes you appear on top of things to clients.

About This Newsletter

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What Should Case Management Do?

The answer to this question depends on your particular practice. What a P.I. firm needs and what a real estate firm needs are vastly different. So the first thing to do is to make a list of your needs: do you need to track medical information, real estate information, personal information for trusts and estates, etc. Do you want the program to generate documents based on client information? What kinds of links do you want to have to time & billing and/or accounting programs (which produce still another level of efficiency)?

You must then decide what trade-offs are acceptable. You can probably find a program that will do 90% of what you need. Customizing it so that it does the last 10% will be difficult and very expensive. In addition, suppose you want two features, A and B. Program One does A very well, but B poorly, whereas Program Two does B very well but is only mediocre at A. What are your priorities? Are there "deal breaker" features, *i.e.*, features whose absence nixes the deal, no matter how well other aspects of the program function?

One of the most important issues is how much of the advanced capabilities of the various programs you wish to use, in particular document assembly or links with document management or e-mail programs.

Once a preliminary list is established, you can begin to examine case management programs. I will deal here primarily with Amicus and Time Matters, which are the two programs I know best. My impression is that Abacus runs a distant third, but may well fit the needs of some firms. Some of the features and functionality you will want to consider include the following:

Ease of Use

How high is ease of use on your list of priorities? This depends largely on how savvy or computerphobic your users are. Amicus is quite a bit easier to use than Time Matters (with some exceptions such as group scheduling) and has a much lower learning curve. Ease of use is an overriding

consideration for many firms and thus Amicus is frequently favored by smaller firms that want a low-maintenance program they can use with a minimum of training. My experience, and that of other consultants who implement these programs, is that Time Matters is likely to require twice the training Amicus does to implement equivalent functionality.

Time Matters is bucking the general "ease of use" trend in the computer industry that is simplifying interfaces and removing complexity. Time Matters unabashedly looks like a spreadsheet, presenting the maximum amount of data possible in a given space. On the other hand, this appeals to users who may want maximum functionality or not like Amicus' "eye candy."

Customization and Training

Do you want to make the program jump through hoops or are you willing to "make do" with minimum customization? Are there specific things the program *must* do for it to work well with your practice? None of these programs can be expected to work "out of the box." They all require customization, and the more advanced features you want, the more that will cost. Time Matters can be customized to a much higher degree than Amicus (but expect to pay extra for a high degree of customization).

An investment in training is the best investment you can make. Users that have been poorly trained (or not at all) will be poor users. Typically, training may be done in two or three "passes" so as not to overwhelm users and to introduce more advanced features when users have become familiar with basic aspects of the program you choose.

Security

If security is a main concern, and you wish to restrict some users' ability to access certain areas or features of the program, Time Matters is the way to go. Amicus security is very basic (a password to get into the program) and is not granular, that is, it cannot be applied selectively to specific functionality (such as the ability to delete records).

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Case Management *(Continued)*

E-mail Integration

Both Amicus and Time Matters have their own in-house e-mail. Amicus will allow you to launch any MAPI-based e-mail program, but it does not let you store e-mail to or from clients in Amicus without a separate step of saving the e-mail as a file. Time Matters has its own e-mail client and bi-directional synchronization with Outlook e-mail and calendaring (as of Service Pack 3). Of course, if you are fortunate enough not to use Outlook, this is not a relevant consideration.

Specific Functionality

You may require specific add-ins to make the product work acceptably. Amicus will integrate with the CompuLaw court rules (although the licensing terms are extremely restrictive), integrates with Lernout & Hauspie's voice recognition, and has a Telephone add-in module that lets Amicus manage all your telephone calls. This only works with certain phone systems (be very careful to check them out) and you need Caller ID, but it can be a great tool. For example, not only does it start to time every phone call you receive for billing purposes, it even lets you schedule who you will accept calls from, while shunting other calls into voice mail.

Support

One thing you need to examine is the level of support available. This depends not only on the support available from the various companies (Time Matters has an edge here for end users), but more importantly what is available from consultants in your area. In many cases the "best program" is the one that has the best consultant in your area.

Scalability

For firms of over about 50 users, the issue of scalability is important. Due primarily to its database structure, you can expect Time Matters to scale better than Amicus. A lot of routine database management in Amicus requires that all users exit the program, which is onerous for larger firms.

Cost

The Return on Investment for any case management program is so spectacular that cost should not really be an issue. You can reasonably expect to recoup your total implementation cost in under three months of use through savings in time and increased efficiency. That said, the sticker price of Time Matters will be less than Amicus, but the total cost of implementation, including training, is likely to be higher for Time Matters than for Amicus.

Conclusion

A number of the above criteria tend to be mutually conflictual, which is why you need a clear set of priorities of what is important to your firm before picking a specific program. You will need to make a series of trade-offs and then "sell" them to your firm. Without properly setting your user expectations, it is all too easy to have a failed installation with the result that nobody uses very many capabilities of whatever program you have chosen. Finally, whatever program you choose, be sure to invest in adequate training. ○

E-Mail and Netiquette

In a business environment, there are generally accepted customs that govern telephone conversations. You answer the phone

by identifying your firm and/or yourself rather than saying "Hello." Since e-mail conventions have not had the same time to sink into the general awareness, a reminder of what has come to be termed "netiquette", the rules and customs that govern e-mail and Internet communication, may be useful.

Don't Shout. Typing all caps for emphasis is considered "shouting" and very impolite (unless of course you mean it).

Don't Send HTML E-Mail. While Outlook supports HTML formatting, many e-mail readers do not and the result can be extremely annoying. It may look something like this:

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<DIV><SPAN class=3D316544017-15011999>Per AA Partnet Newsletter, would appreciate=20 receiving a sample and a pricing sheet.</SPAN></DIV>
<DIV><SPAN class=3D316544017-15011999>Thanks,</SPAN></DIV>
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Yes, the text is there. Need I say more?

Don't Set "Reply to All" as Default. Suppose a mailing goes out announcing the company picnic. You reply that you can't make it, but forget to uncheck "reply to all." Most people could care less that you can't make it and will simply be annoyed. This is very impolite.

Technolawyer ListServe

For attorneys interested in technology issues, the Technolawyer listserve is an extremely useful resource: www.technolawyer.com.

John Heckman contributes regularly to this forum. A much abbreviated version of the Case Management article above will appear in the "TechnoDebate" column of *Law Office Computing*, Dec.-Jan. 2001 issue. ○

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