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:: Voice Productivity

10 Reasons Behind the Workflow Revolution

The rapid evolution from letter communication to e-mail is in striking contrast to the continued use of manual tapes or .wav recording for dictation, but it's not set to last for much longer. Similar to the wholesale consumer transition from cassette/CD to sophisticated MP3 players, digital dictation workflow tools designed for the legal technology sector have come of age in the last 12 months. Over 800 law firms worldwide have already ditched their tapes or .wav standalone devices and moved over to workflow software. Furthermore, in an increasingly competitive legal market, law firms are now making the recommendation that attorneys who can type should no longer waste time creating their own documents.

Even without considering the improvements in speech recognition, moving to legal digital dictation workflow can dramatically improve the "voice productivity" rating at your firm. Here are 10 areas outlining the inefficiencies and risks experienced with legacy systems such as tapes or standalone digital dictation systems:

No. 1 — Billable Time

Many attorneys do not dictate at all. Old tape-based systems are antiquated and very inefficient in terms of back-up transcription support. In addition, some attorneys, especially younger associates with advanced PC skills, get into the habit of doing the work themselves. In recent years, this has been encouraged. However, it is inefficient for attorneys to type all of this documentation or get involved in administration. They are paid to think, apply the law and communicate with clients, not get caught up in document production.

To date, in the absence of an alternative, this "type-it-yourself" practice has crept in across the board. However, digital dictation workflow systems redress this balance. Materials produced in this way are out the door much more quickly than attorney-produced documents, leaving

them more time to acquire more work, add more legal value and increase billable time. It pays to stop typing.

No. 2 — Security

Privacy, confidentiality and security are paramount to the nature of a law firm's work. Essentially, if someone external — by accident or with malice — obtained a cassette tape or .wav file while it was in the process of being delivered, sent or stored almost certainly breaches client confidentiality. Your firm could be open to litigation. After all, how can you guarantee that a lost tape or .wav has not been listened to externally?

Legally-focused digital dictation workflow systems compress and encrypt dictation to ensure that a law firm's need for total confidentiality and security is addressed. These highly secure formats offer each law firm complete protection from security issues while the audio file is "in-transit" across the network and while stored on the server. Advanced systems also make use of three-tier architecture, standard SQL practices and Active Directory, thus increasing your dictation security levels and disaster recovery provisions further.

No. 3 — Working Remotely

Typically, there are three common scenarios in working and dictating remotely: (1) an attorney goes from office A to office B and has to wait until returning to office A to pass the tapes back to a secretary; (2) an attorney is traveling to a meeting or commuting and either waits until returning to the office to pass the tape to a secretary or dictates to the secretary's voice mail; or (3) attorneys or secretaries work from home and have to courier tapes or use voice mail systems not necessarily designed for accurate dictation.

With tape or .wav standalone systems, each of these scenarios can be plagued with delays and risks. Such issues often can be resolved by legal digital dictation workflow systems which will utilize a combination

of laptop, VPN/RAS, Citrix or Terminal Services, Web, professional dictation devices or telephony (via PDA or cell phone) to enable dictation to be sent back to office support staff immediately. These devices also can sync automatically with an attorney's inbox, eliminating the need to browse in order to move or save files. Saving even small amounts of time across the document creation process adds up.

No. 4 — Assistant Teamwork

If a secretary is overloaded, it's often culturally and practically difficult to ask for help from other secretaries. Digital dictation workflow systems can create "virtual" teams, where secretaries in a department band together to turn work around quickly because they can see all the outstanding work tracked on screen. This visibility and flexible workflow helps transform the legal support culture organically.

No. 5 — Confidentiality

Cassette tapes, as with standalone .wav files, can be picked up or opened by anyone internally and played at their leisure. Piles of tapes are left on desks openly visible to others in a team; .wav recordings of confidential client matters may be openly available in network folders. This makes it impossible to guarantee confidentiality or an ethical wall provision for your clients. Legal digital dictation workflow software allows for confidential "workflows" including password protection if desired. A user is assigned group rights that enable him or her to either submit or retrieve dictations from a "Confidential" folder. Password protection allows an attorney to assign the dictation a file level password, which can be opened only by the relevant secretary.

No. 6 — Inter/Intrastate Cooperation

If you have more than one office within a state or across several states, potentially, it could be easier to apportion work among available document support resources. However, with tape cassettes, if a secretary in New York is overloaded, there's not much a secretary in Chicago with spare time can do to assist. With a digital dictation workflow system, the Chicago secretary can be assigned the project without compromising security or confidentiality.

In addition, an attorney can move among offices in your network and have dictation immediately processed into documents by his or her assigned secretary. The system automatically routes dictation to the correct secretary in seconds. The attorneys can have legal documents processed without returning to the office or worrying about how it's going to get done. Large firms also can utilize time zone savings by moving the dictation workload to another time zone when the working day in the originating time zone ends.

No. 7 — Management Reporting

Unlike tapes or standalone systems, when data is digital, workflow software allows total visibility and tracking of management information across users, departments and sites. Reports such as the number of dictations completed daily, number outstanding at the end of the work day, average number of dictations in "Work in Progress" folders, secretarial performance over time, top performers, etc., are available to management.

No. 8 — Legal Systems Integration

Legal document management systems have led to an increasingly matter-centric environment where attorneys or secretaries access other applications using the DMS. Having to change among systems to produce documents can waste time. Most digital dictation workflow systems designed for legal can be integrated with the DMS or come complete with APIs that serve to link the systems, so users can dictate from inside the DMS and yet again, save precious time in the document creation process.

No. 9 — Overhead Costs

When a secretary is out ill or on holiday, a pile of outstanding cassette tapes may sit on the end of the desk (or .wav files build in the inbox) awaiting completion. To cover such contingencies, a firm may have to carry a team of floater secretaries, pay secretarial overtime or bring in a temporary contract employee to get it done. With a workflow system, the outstanding workload can be divided up among other secretaries so as to minimally impact any one person's volume of tasks. One thing to do if you're thinking of changing over from tapes or a standalone system is to identify how much overtime or temporary agency fees are incurred in one year. It may pay for your new system.

No. 10 — Client Service

A digital dictation workflow system significantly enhances service to clients. Secretaries make fewer mistakes as the sound quality is clearer, documents are turned around more quickly, and attorneys spend more time on relationship management as they are not producing their own documents.

Your firm may not need 10 reasons to consider implementing a digital dictation workflow solution. No matter how many are applicable, this is the path of the future, and it could revolutionize your document production environment.