

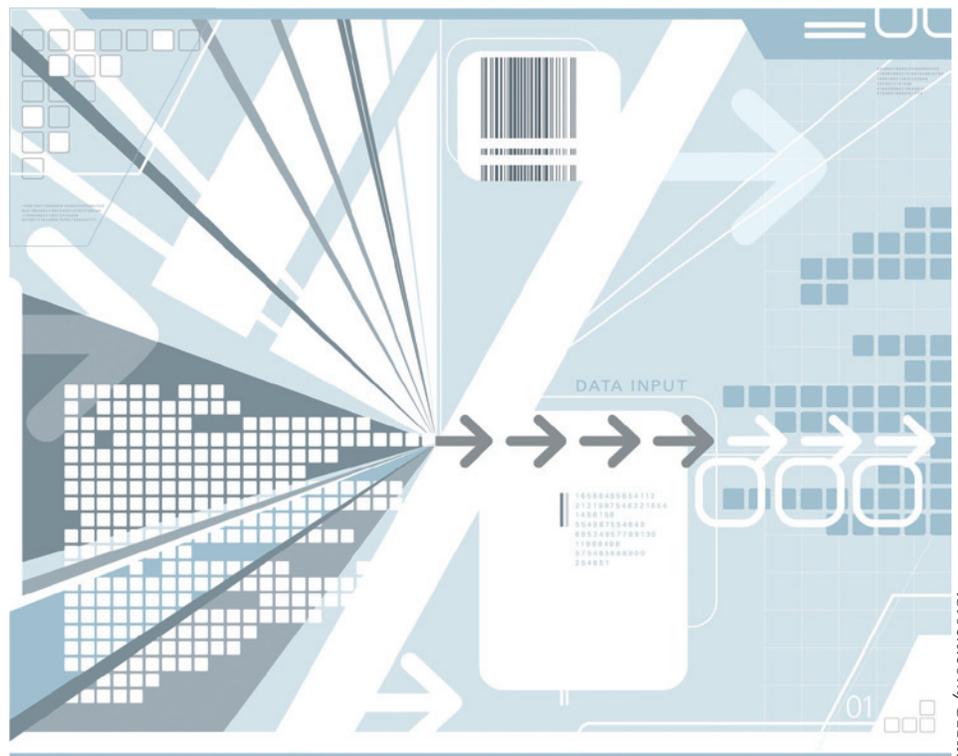
## TIME TO WORK WORKFLOW TECHNOLOGY INTO THE LAW FIRM ARSENAL?

Workflow technology is key to successfully improving efficiency and arming law firms for high-quality service, one columnist writes.

BY ERIC WANGLER, BIGHAND

Since the economic downturn, the legal industry has experienced dramatic changes. After the initial market crash in 2008, law firm revenues have been slow to recover. In an article in *The New York Times*, authors of a survey from Citi Private Bank's quarterly report on the legal industry were quoted saying, "the demand for traditional law firm services has remained relatively soft, the supply of legal service providers has increased, creating a hypercompetitive market and forcing law firms to think about how they deliver legal services."

Clients have started requesting service level agreements (SLA) to ensure they are getting the best value for their money. Given that trend, law firm leaders have had to look for new ways to control costs and be more aggressive with their billing practices in order



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to maintain profitability and meet client demands. In addition, according to the 2016 Altman Weil Law Firms in Transition Survey, 95.5 percent of managing partners and law firm chairs believe the trend of more price competition is permanent.

Initially when the market shifted, firms turned to cutting administrative staff to decrease their costs. However, it was soon clear that this type of short-term solution had significant drawbacks. The remaining support staff were expected to do the same amount of work

with fewer people, leading to increased stress and compromised work quality and customer service. More recently, there's been a trend to consolidate back office work to an administrative pool, an off-site (less expensive) location or even a third-party service provider in an ongoing effort to reduce overhead and waste. In fact, the 2016 study Trends and Opportunities in Law Firm Outsourcing conducted for Williams Lea noted that almost half (45 percent) of firms surveyed reported centralizing their back office functions.

The Williams Lea survey also indicated that 38 percent of firms reported concerns about managing process and workflow re-engineering. Most firms currently do not have a standardized process or centralized system for effectively delegating tasks, managing workflow and allocating resources. Many firms have no system at all, relying on administrative staff to manage a multitude of requests submitted randomly by email, voicemail, paper forms or verbal requests. Without a centralized system, it is nearly impossible to quantify and prioritize the work that needs to be done on a firmwide basis, let alone the work a department or

individual has in a particular queue. With more firms turning toward centralization of their back office functions, managing this new process and workflow will be paramount.

To be successful in reducing costs without sacrificing their level of service, firms must consider more long-term and systemic changes to their processes. One quickly emerging option is software that is built specifically to manage administrative workflow and task delegation for law firms. In the 2014 ILTA/Inside Legal Technology Purchasing Survey, 21 percent of firms indicated they had purchased workflow automation technology within the last year or were planning to purchase it in the next 12 months. In the 2015 survey, this number went up to 24 percent. This new technology not only centralizes and captures all of the work in the queue, it can also help management track, analyze and optimize resource allocation to ensure top-level service that meets and exceeds clients' expectations.

### **How Workflow Technology Works**

Automated workflow software is designed to aid attorneys and support staff in accurately and efficiently

managing the various tasks that are sent throughout the firm on a daily basis. A centralized system helps to accurately capture, assign and quantifiably manage the processing of these tasks. This method takes the place of randomly assigning tasks through disparate means and allows delegation of work into a unified system via a standardized process. Proper instructions are gathered based on the task as it is entered into the system, and it is then automatically routed to the appropriate party.

Some workflow systems allow a time estimate to be assigned to each task, helping identify not just the number of tasks in the queue but also the human effort associated with completing those tasks. Some systems also offer a dashboard that enables a transparent view of all tasks in the system, including who is responsible, prioritization and status. These systems can track metrics as tasks are completed, capturing an accurate assessment of the time it takes to accomplish each specific type of task.

### **Benefits of Workflow Technology**

There are many tangible benefits to implementing a firmwide system to manage workflow. One important benefit of a

centralized workflow system is that it allows management to streamline task delegation. Configurable workflow streams ensure that tasks are assigned immediately to the right person or team that is best suited to manage the work. The firm can tailor input forms by task to capture all of the required information at the start of the job. This helps minimize needless back-and-forth communication to clarify incomplete instructions that typically result from email or other inconsistent delegation techniques. A key to successful implementation of a workflow tool is to tailor the input forms to be task-specific, intuitive and user-friendly to ensure even the least technical attorneys and staff will embrace the transition.

The best centralized workflow systems can also provide firms an improved ability to manage work on a micro level, answering questions such as:

- How much work do I have in the queue?
- Do I have the proper resources to complete it?
- What work can I move around to meet today's deadlines?

- Our New York office is closed due to a weather emergency; what other office can take its work?
- What is the status of the rush project that the partner is worried about?

They can even provide firms a greater ability to manage work on a macro level:

- How much work is each practice area generating and are they properly staffed?
- Which employees or teams are most efficient and at what tasks?
- Can we centralize a team around a certain workflow?
- Should we outsource more of our work?
- Are our service providers meeting their SLA?
- Are we meeting our clients' SLA?

From a customer-facing standpoint, a proper workflow system ensures deadlines are met, projects are completed accurately and efficiently and potential resource challenges are identified long before a customer service issue arises. Naturally, quality of work is improved if projects are properly defined on the front end and assigned to the person or teams best able to complete

them. Lawyers and staff are able to track the work on a desktop or mobile application and accurately communicate status as needed. This mitigates common issues such as "Our outsource partner missed a deadline" or "I was just notified we are about to miss a court filing."

Finally, a central system that captures workflow can provide metrics and critical data that allow law firm management to truly analyze and improve operations. Real-time information on how many tasks are in the queue along with accurate estimates of the time needed to accomplish that work is a powerful tool in ensuring optimal resource allocation and task management. This information is key to the ongoing success of law firms as the market and industry continue to evolve.

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