

## **DMS or electronic filing**

When designing IT systems for any organisation, it is always sensible to look at the manual paper based systems that they are replacing, especially where the manual processes have been refined over a long period of time. There is normally a good reason why things are done the way they are, and for any apparent inefficiencies in the way things are done. With a manual system, things can usually only happen in one way and compromises will have been made. Moving to a computer based system makes it much easier to do things differently in different circumstances, and can greatly improve efficiency. If in the process of computerisation the original processes were forgotten it is likely that much of this benefit will be missed.

Document management in law firms is a large topic, but is a good example of where the process of computerisation has lost track of the requirements. Many firms now have the majority of their documents in electronic format, and are looking at how they can move to a totally electronic filing system for client files. However, many are finding that while their DMS is theoretically capable of combining Word documents, emails and scanned images into a client file this is not as simple or practical as it should be.

The reason for this is that law firm document management systems do not replace the processes used in paper filing systems. One of the main reasons for this is that they were not originally designed to. A legal document management system was designed to control the process of document production: making sure that lawyers could find the electronic versions of things they were working on; making sure that they always had the right version; making sure that people did not overwrite changes; helping them match paper documents to electronic ones.

The main outcome of this is that document management systems in law firms treat all documents as 'live'. In other words, they try and keep everything to hand, ready to be worked on at a moments notice. The paper based client files on the other hand work on the assumption that all files are 'archive'. New documents are added to the files in date order. When the file is full, a new one is started. Old files are gradually moved further away from the lawyer to archive stores, but they can always be retrieved.

Managing data in the IT world makes the distinction between live and archive data in the same way as the paper based world. Importantly, storage and management of live data is significantly more expensive than archive data. It requires more management. It requires frequent and fast backups. Archive data on the other hand is cheap to manage, easy to protect from disasters, and easy to move around. This is why adding vast volumes of email and even scanned documents to the DMS seems impractical and costly.

Firms looking to move to electronic client filing, and there are huge advantages to doing so, need to look for systems that manage the process of creating a static, secure and flexible archive store. Firms that try to scale their live document control systems will have endless problems and find that the behind the scenes running costs in staff time and infrastructure are not affordable in the long term.

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