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PMS and integration

All law firms have some form of Practice Management System (PMS), and most firms except the very smallest will have software to support their human resources and marketing operations. Much has been discussed about whether integrating best of breed applications provides a better platform than purchasing an integrated system from single supplier, but is there any value in joining these systems at all?

There are several arguments put forward for having integrated back office systems. Looking at the business from the point of view of efficiency, an integrated system can reduce the amount of work by eliminating having people entering the same data into multiple systems and duplicating effort. From the lawyers' point of view, joined up information in the support areas provides them with a simpler set of applications on their desktop, allowing them to use a single interface to find our what they want without having to work out first whether the information belongs to finance, to marketing or to human resources. Finally, information managers will point out how much more valuable the data stored in these systems is when you can report across all of it, allowing firms to spot trends and relationships that would be impossible to see with separate systems.

Back office integration

The efficiency saving in data entry into support systems (where data may actually be entered by secretaries and fee earners, as well as by support staff) can be achieved in different ways. With a truly single system, information entered about, say, staff is available to all functions. If the applications are separate but integration has been done at the back end, information entered into the 'master' system, for example names into the HR system, can be transferred automatically into other systems that need it. As a final option, data entry can be captured using workflow software or web forms, which then posts the information separately into every database that needs it.

Not only does reducing the number of times information is entered save time, it also increases accuracy through these the greater re use of the same data, resulting in mistakes being picked up more often. The quality of the information is also improved as users make more effort; nothing leads to low quality data more reliably than making a fee earner enter it over and over again.

Desktop integration

Most fee earners would like to simplify the applications they have to use on the desktop to access information. Two main routes to achieve this have become common: the intranet portal and the open desktop application. In the first, data from all systems is fed into a common web based interface to allow fee earners to query the underlying information. Whether this information resides in one or more programs is hidden from them. As an alternative, desktop applications from major PMS (and other) system vendors allows them to not only present information from their own database but also to pull data from other systems to provide a common view.

Anything that simplifies the access to information can only help the firm, and if this simplification can be linked in to improvements in processes these advantages are multiplied. Most firms now agree that a matter centric view is useful when working on matters, where all relevant information is brought together, and the same is true of the creation of client centred views and lawyer centred views to support other aspects of the work in a typical day.

Data integration

Most major back office systems these days allow a certain degree of interaction with other systems. How easy and practical this is will of course vary. Using this feature sensibly it is possible to create a set of databases across all your systems, even if they are from different suppliers, that provide a single linked view of all the information. Getting the value out of this integrated data will require both a reporting tool that can actually be used, and someone whose job it is ask questions across this information. Both of these can be problematic. While there are management information tools available, they are often very expensive and can be complex to set up.

The key to making this work is to understand where each part of the information resides, and who is responsible for maintaining it. It does not matter if the information is

One of the problems with integrating the underlying data is dealing with the existing and historic information. If the list of staff in the HR system has never been linked to the list of staff in the accounts system, it can be a major manual exercise to create this link. Even more complex can be the exercise of linking clients in the PMS to contacts in the marketing database, where the different uses of the information can mean that there are minor differences in both the content and the structure of the information.

Once this effort has been put in, queries can be made across the sets of data. Whether you want to know the total value of the fees obtained from clients who attend golf days, or you want to find out if there is a correlation between the chargeable hours achieved by associates and the way they were recruited into the firm, the answers can now be found with a small amount of effort with the reporting and analysis software.

Summary

Linking your PMS to other support systems such as HR and marketing or CRM systems can provide terrific advantages by giving access to information about how the firm is operating and performing that would otherwise remain unknown. However there is significant time and effort involved in getting both the software and the processes set up in the first place, regardless of whether the software is from a single vendor or not. Once this has been done, the value is still not realised until this information is used in ways that span the individual functions.

While many firms try to achieve these advantages, very few make it to the last stage of gaining new insights from reports and investigations into the joined up database. As well as technical complexity and cost, some of the blame for this failure rests with the way law firm support departments are often structured as separate groups of people, who by definition are only interested in their own part of this data, and also in the way law firm management relies on information fed back from these departments and often lacks the experience to ask searching questions that require integrated data. With a continuous increase in the competitive nature of the legal sector, and the growth in chief executives and partners with overall responsibility for back office operations, we are likely to see this changing gradually, and leading firms gaining some competitive advantage.

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