

DIGITAL SYSTEMS THE NEW NORMAL

Enhance your key practice systems now to thrive in 2021 and beyond.



The key tools for law firms today are cloud based practice management systems that allow staff to manage files documents and communication in one place. A good practice management system more than pays for itself in time saving, consistency, management oversight and ultimately risk management.

Never let a good crisis go to waste

Many firms put in temporary fixes in 2020 to enable remote work but with a new year ahead, Winston Churchill's famous statement – "never let a good crisis go to waste" – is good to go by in setting your intention for 2021. While we may now be allowed slowly back into the office, remote and flexible working and its benefits will be here to stay in various forms. With this in mind, now is a good time to think about how you want to practise in the future. As part of that thinking, ask if you have the right practice management system to operate effectively in 2021 and beyond.

A global survey of executives by McKinsey has reported that digital adoption has leapt forward the equivalent of seven years since the COVID-19 crisis hit and these changes won't be reversed. The legal sector needs to continue to adopt more digital systems and move away from paper based file handling. As most sectors adopt more digitally based solutions and customer service interfaces, clients are going to be expecting the same from their law firms. This is where a good practice management system can help.

Benefits of a good practice management system

Whether you are looking at investing in your first practice management system, changing the one you have or getting better use of it, here are some of the benefits you can expect from a good practice management system:

- a centrally stored electronic file for each matter, including:
 - emails, letters and documents
 - contact details for all parties in the matter
 - workflow or checklists for the matter
 - account records
 - time recording records (if you still do time recording)
- common calendar for critical dates
- generated action lists for individual operators, simplifying and prioritising tasks
- customisable workflows for different types of matters, allowing consistency across the same type of matters
- easy-to-use precedent document management allowing for a firm's own customised precedents as well as purchased precedents
- simplifying precedent document assembly, avoiding double handling and ensuring accurate data transfer
- accurate management reporting to assist in supervision, workload allocation and productivity assessment
- integrates with information service platforms and ELNO platforms to avoid double handling information
- integrated messaging or portal for clients
- provides an app version for practitioner mobility.

The feature most relevant for any sized firm is the ability to centrally store everything in one electronic file. Firms may think they have electronic records, but the information is spread across a word folder for documents, different emails (different staff email addresses) for communication and telephone text messages. Often, they also have a hard copy file for original documents received from the other side, and it is difficult, if not impossible, to bring it all together years after the event when the file is needed.

Skills to use digital systems

The Victorian Legal Services Board + Commissioner practice management guidelines confirm that lawyers running law firms are required to have the knowledge and skills to integrate technology into all aspects of running a legal firm.¹

All lawyers have an obligation to deliver legal services competently, diligently and as promptly as reasonably possible.² This includes having the skills to effectively use the digital tools to achieve these outcomes, especially as courts and other organisations and departments essential for legal work are increasingly moving to digital service. Like the law, digital tools are constantly changing, and you need a mindset to continually learn new skills to do the work effectively.

Regular training

To get the most out of any investment in software tools there needs to be regular training and a culture of excellence in using them well. People need knowledge about what is possible and then time and incentive to develop good digital use habits. Don't underestimate the need for regular training and review to ensure that the practice management system you are paying for is being used properly.

Every size firm can benefit from using a practice management system. There are many to choose from so when looking for a new system, or assessing your current one, start by considering the features listed above.

For more information about the value of systems see LPLC's Work Habit webinar recording. ■

This column is provided by the **Legal Practitioners' Liability Committee**. For further information ph 9672 3800 or visit www.lplc.com.au.

1. VLSB+C (October 2017), Practice Management Course Guidelines for Victoria (<https://tinyurl.com/y4qon3v9>).
2. *Legal Profession Uniform Law Australian Solicitors' Conduct Rules 2015*, rule 4.1.3

TIPS

- Practice management systems are essential tools for every law firm in 2021 and beyond.
- Practice management systems provide risk management benefits through efficiency and consistency.
- Skills and knowledge are required for principals and lawyers to integrate and use technology.
- Regular training is necessary for these tools to be used properly.