

# Why Document Management?

---

By John Heckman

June 2003

## INTRODUCTION

For medium and large law firms, with tens or hundreds of thousands of documents, using a document management program to organize, index and control their documents is an absolute necessity.

Many smaller firms, however, do not see the need. They feel that with a well thought out directory structure they can have adequate access to their documents. They argue that any added functionality offered by document management programs is not worth the expense of additional hardware and software, training, and administration.

This article details some of the advantages document management offers even a small law firm. Naturally, there is a wide range of opinion concerning essential features versus superfluous bells and whistles. However, keep in mind that very often when a feature that might otherwise be considered an "extra" is needed, it is very badly needed.

## HOW DOCUMENT MANAGEMENT WORKS

In a document management system, each document is assigned a profile sheet which typically contains a long description for the document, author, client/matter information, document type (brief, contract, memo, etc.) and perhaps other items. Both this profile and the full text of the document are indexed for rapid retrieval. A file name is assigned by the document management system, which decides where to store the document based on criteria set up by the firm (author, document type, client/matter number). This process is transparent to the end-user.

One of the first issues a firm needs to decide is whether or not use of the document management system should be obligatory. However, giving users the option of "opting out" of document management almost inevitably means crippling the system due to human error or lack of cooperation by recalcitrant users. So the ability to "lock down" the system is key. When a user starts to retrieve a document, a list of the last 20 or so documents he or she has worked on, including the long document description, appears first. If the desired document is not on this list, the user enters search criteria on the profile screen and is presented with a list of "hits." Fairly complex Boolean searches are generally possible, including a combined search of both the profiles and the full text index of the entire document store.

Depending on the program, additional features can provide advanced security options, better reporting on document use, version control, an audit trail showing who has accessed the document, and so forth.

## THE CASE FOR DOCUMENT MANAGEMENT

What does such a system give a firm that a manual system does not?

**Greater Speed of Document Retrieval.** In a manual system, the user must know where an existing document has been stored and what its name is. While most users are fairly efficient at finding their own documents, searching for a document created by someone else can take a significant amount of time, which in any event is bound to be greater than the 5 seconds or so it takes a document management system to find a document. In many cases, a user spends 5 minutes or more searching for a document, or even winds up retyping it!

**Avoidance of Human Error.** The time lost in a manual system due to human error is substantial. A user may have stored a document in the wrong place by accident, forgotten what the document was named, or even "dragged and dropped" an entire directory to some new location without even being aware of it. When someone other than the original author tries to access a document, difficulties are compounded. A user may have to look in four or five places before finding a document, or even be unable to find it at all. If the original author of the document is out of the office due to vacation, illness, etc. this can be a serious problem. When people change jobs or assignments, the problem is aggravated.

**Control over Document Access.** Document management typically gives a firm much better control over document security and access. Confidential documents can be made available only to the people who need to see them, whether it be accounting, human resources, trusts and estates or those responsible for highly confidential client matters.

By defining what groups of people have access to which kinds of documents, document management systems avoid the problems inherent in password-protecting documents, which range from forgetting passwords to posting them on yellow stickies on the computer monitor. Security provisions frequently include an audit trail showing who last accessed a document, who made changes, printed it, checked it out, etc.

**Full Profile and Text Indexing.** The fact that profiles and the full text of all documents are indexed has other advantages besides increased efficiency in retrieving documents. For example, you can define a search that lets you see at a glance all documents of a particular type that contain certain words (all briefs containing the term "amputation" for example). Full text indexing can also be of assistance in conflict checking, for example, by searching on all documents that refer to a particular business or person. Finally, in some programs, such as WORLDOX, when you run a full text search and then "View" a document in the hit list, the document opens at the specific text for which you searched.

**Other Features.** Many document management systems make it easy to set up a boilerplate library, where a firm can store forms or basic documents that it uses and adapts repeatedly. The problem with doing this in a manual system is that someone inevitably edits a boilerplate document that was supposed to be copied first, and the "boilerplate" has to be re-created.

## **BATTLE FOR THE DESKTOP**

The name of the game among software makers these days is the battle for control of the desktop. Vendors want to make their programs the "center" from which users organize all their other activities and programs. That is, theirs will be the program that firms buy first and then consider other items. If some of their features do not match those offered by standalone programs, this is supposedly compensated for by better integration and cost savings. Some programs (such as Amicus Attorney) focus primarily on linking with other programs rather than trying to write their own modules.

### **What Are the Key Features?**

To evaluate built-in document management features of a given program, a firm needs to determine what features are important to its practice, and which ones are superfluous "bells and whistles." Main features include:

- "Profiles" govern the creation and retrieval of documents so that users need know only the characteristics of a document, not its location, to retrieve it.
- Full-text indexing of all documents (not just word processing).
- Combined search of profile and full-text index.
- Integration with the main programs you use, in particular e-mail and scanned documents, as well as Acrobat, Excel, etc.
- "Locking Down" the system so that users are forced to use it.
- Individual document security as well as by category (e.g., all HR documents)
- Version Control.
- Audit trail to see who has accessed (printed, checked-out, etc.) documents.
- Reporting (all documents of a certain type, or all documents used by "X").
- Check-out/Check-in of documents.
- "Mirroring" so that backup copies are on the local hard drive if network is down (especially useful if you are using a laptop and want to take things with you).
- Automated link to Time/Billing system so that new matters can be imported into the system automatically.
- Web Access to your document store.

## **WHO ARE THE PLAYERS?**

For smaller and mid-size firms, the main player is WORLDOX (iManage and Docs Open are popular among larger firms). WORLDOX is a full-fledged document management program, that is, it includes all the features listed above. In addition, WORLDOX does not require the overhead (additional server and SQL databases) of either Docs Open or iManage.

With the release of version 5, Time Matters should now be considered seriously. It has beefed up its document management piece, in particular offering version control, some document auditing, and the ability to work with programs other than word processors. However, it is still lacking in certain key areas, in particular:

- Time Matters cannot "lock down" the system so that users are forced to use document management. This is frequently a major issue.
- You cannot run a combined search across both profiles and full text.
- Time Matters does not have any form of local "mirroring" to protect your documents if the network is down (or to make it easy for laptop users to take documents home with them).
- Integration with other programs (such as Acrobat, Excel) is still limited.

However, all in all, for a firm that does not want to spend the extra money for a full-fledged document management system, Time Matters offers an acceptable entry-level system.

## **CONCLUSION**

Any document management implementation will pay for itself very quickly just by reducing the amount of time spent in retrieving documents. In addition, such a system offers significant additional functionality when compared to a simple directory structure that is accessed manually. This functionality includes better security provisions, audit trails showing who has modified or used documents, and increased ease of creating and using boilerplate documents. Finally, a well-conceived implementation of a program such as WORLDOX can be maintained with a minimum of administrative time.

Copyright 2003 John Heckman. All rights reserved.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

John Heckman has assisted law firms with technology issues for 20 years as the principal of Heckman Consulting, a systems integration firm specializing in practice management (Amicus Attorney, Time Matters) and document management (WORLDOX). John has assisted a number of clients convert from WordPerfect to Word. His clients range from solo practitioners to AmLaw 100 law firms. You can contact John via e-mail to [heckman@heckmanco.com](mailto:heckman@heckmanco.com) or telephone (860-395-0881), and you can visit Heckman Consulting on the Web at <http://www.heckmanco.com>.