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:: Records Management Systems

Stand-Alone No More?

It used to be that we went to grocery stores to buy food, department stores to buy clothes and auto shops to service our cars. Now places like Wal-Mart Supercenter, Costco, and Super Target, make it possible to do one-stop shopping for groceries, clothes and tires, and even book a vacation. Consolidation is happening everywhere. Individual devices such as cell phones, cameras, MP3 players, GPS devices, calculators, e-mail receivers, PDAs and wireless modems are all consolidating into a single, integrated, smart mobile device.

Multiple Document Systems for a Single Law Firm

This evolution is also occurring in the legal technology space. We now go to a document management (DM) system to store our active documents, a records management (RM) system to archive documents related to closed matters, an extranet service to share documents externally, an e-mail archival system to stub Outlook messages and deflate Microsoft Exchange and a knowledge management (KM) system to research internal and Lexis/Westlaw content. Each of these systems has its own infrastructure for servers, storage, databases, security, administration, APIs, search, authentication, user interface, taxonomy, retention policies and matter-centricity.

The deployment of each of these individual systems can be costly and complex. The combined maintenance and integration of all systems is frightening. A technology which aggregates all document services into a single service and repository would provide enormous benefit for law firms, administrators and end users.

Records Management — The Center of the Universe

In a multisystem environment, it makes sense to consider RM as the final resting place for all digital records because it is the system designed for long-term storage and retention. However, documents also

exist in DM, e-mail programs, PST files, e-mail management/archival systems (EM) and extranets. Consequently, the RM system either has to import documents from these other systems (creating duplicate data), or it has to establish pointers to data residing in the original repositories but managed from a central RM system (creating complexity).

A Single Repository

In a single repository environment, the overall service provides a common infrastructure for storage, API, security, administration, search and taxonomy. Specific functionality is built upon the universal infrastructure: version control and Microsoft Word integration (for DM), retention and purging policies (for RM), e-mail capture and Exchange deflation (for EM), collaboration and notifications (for extranets) and legal citation cross-referencing (for KM). There is nothing to gain by replicating infrastructures.

Benefits of a Single Repository

Emerging technologies offer firms and law departments a single repository and a single service for work-in-process documents, e-mail capture and archival, Microsoft Exchange grooming, extranet sharing, digital records retention and purging policies, knowledge management and even litigation services. Everything is based upon a single repository with a single database and user interface. There is no need to import/export data or set pointers from RM to other repositories. For administrators, this approach offers simplicity and ease of administration. For the firm, it constitutes much lower computing costs. For the end users and attorneys, the concept of a single service for all the digital files offers even more benefits:

A single service can enforce security policies uniformly across all documents. For example, if John Doe must be “conflicted out” of a specific matter, simply establish a straightforward ethical wall for

that case and do it in just one place. The user doesn't have to worry about seeing something he or she shouldn't see.

An enterprise search engine would be built-in to index all metadata and full-text content for all of the firm's digital files. An attorney can issue a query on "Johnson Brothers Estates" within 50 words of "wrongful termination" and find the results in seconds across all DM, RM and EM contents. With a single service, the implementation of an enterprise search engine is never "yet another project," and the deployment of federated searching across multiple systems never becomes an issue.

In a multisystem environment, aggregating data for matter-centricity is complex. In a single repository service, displaying documents, e-mail messages, records and extranets in a matter-centric display is trivial. There is no need to normalize disparate data types through a portal or workspace view. All folder organization and data views are consistent across systems.

When navigating from DM to KM to EM and to extranets, users find a common look and feel in a single service. There is uniformity in drag and drop, right mouse clicking, color schemes and menus. A document would never have two different document numbers, one issued by the DM and another by the RM system.

With a single service, data access from the Web and mobile devices is built-in. There is no need for multiple authentication methods, remote access challenges and disparate display formats.

Managing E-Mail Messages

According to UC Berkeley, 400,000 terabytes of e-mail are produced each year. "Out of control Outlook" is a popular discussion among CIOs because so many attorneys have critical documents in unmanaged Outlook folders and not in the DM. Some attorneys store important documents and messages in PST files, which are invisible to the IT staff. Yet *Sarbanes-Oxley*, Graham Leach, SEC-17a and the Federal Rules of Civil Procedures all demand best practices in records keeping.

Records Management systems today must perform three functions regarding e-mail messages:

Capture messages and attachments in matter-centric workspaces (profile and index)

Enforce retention and purging policies

Deflate and groom the e-mail system for efficiency purposes

Systems today just do one of the three functions mentioned above. DM systems capture e-mail messages for profiling and matter centricity. RM systems age them with retention policies. E-mail archival systems deflate, stub and purge Exchange contents. This forces firms to deploy multiple systems for e-mail, resulting in all the typical problems derived with multiple infrastructures. Document services are just now evolving to where an integrated RM system can simultaneously capture the messages, age them and groom Exchange.

Managing Files with Canonized Versions

Traditionally, the DM system would host work-in-process (WIP) documents, while the RM system would host the same document at completion. In many instances, however, the author never knows when a document is final. Consider a proposed settlement agreement created by the attorney (version 1) and faxed to the client. The RM system must consider version 1 as a record, because it defines the exact contents of the document at the time it was faxed to the client. The attorney, however, may continue to work on version 2, to reflect the suggested modifications by the client. Version 3, containing the edits by the senior partner, is e-mailed to the client. Finally, version 5 is express mailed to the opposing party. Now the RM system must "canonize" versions 1, 3 and 5 as records, while all versions are still in the DM system.

The reality is that the canonization process to transform files and documents into nonrepudiated records is best done at the version level, instead of at the document level. Such a dynamic version-based canonization process can be much more efficiently handled by a single service that incorporates DM and RM functionality, instead of by multiple systems attempting to declare the very same digital file as both a work-in-process document and a record simultaneously.

The SaaS Factor

Another technology trend to be considered is the preeminence of software-as-a-service (SaaS). This is a technology where the firm subscribes to a service, leaving the deployment and management to third-party, trusted experts. For an integrated document service, the SaaS model offers unmatched levels of simplicity, scalability, disaster recovery, universal access and, above all, security.

Consider the fact that simplicity and cost savings are already attained through a common service. Now consider the possibility of also relieving the firm from the costs associated with hardware, software, storage, databases, index reconstructions, three-tier architecture, backups, maintenance upgrades and desktop software management. The IT staff would be focused on optimizing attorney productivity, line-of-business strategic initiatives and deploying practice-specific technologies, instead of the never-ending maintenance of systems and servers.

Legal document services including records management are not only aggregating, they also are getting much more powerful, secure, and comprehensive under the "just turn it on" concept of SaaS.

A Unified Future

Records management systems, as with DM, EM, KM and extranets, must evolve to a single service in order to reduce legal computing costs, simplify administration and create a common infrastructure for search, security, retention policies and data organization. The true winners will be the end users. While today's legal systems are all separate, future market pressures will compel the unification of these systems into a single and comprehensive document service.

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