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A Lesson in CRM: What Matters to Lawyers Are Matters

By Barry Solomon

Client relationship management (CRM) applications succeed within the law firm environment when they address both the organization's strategic needs, as well as the user's individual needs. For instance, time and billing systems achieve firm wide goals of providing visibility and efficiency in the client billing process. These systems also relieve lawyers from the manual drudgery of managing and calculating their billable hours. Both the organization and individual lawyers obtain obvious value from these systems. Win-win.

But with so many CRM products in the marketplace with varying capabilities, there seems to be a growing disconnect between the strategic value that firms enjoy from these solutions, and the benefits derived by individual lawyers. The challenge therefore becomes one of focus. If lawyers do not clearly understand how CRM directly helps them do their jobs more effectively, they will not use the system nor contribute relationship intelligence for the benefit of others. And without lawyer buy in, the rest of the implementation will suffer rendering it more difficult for marketing, business development teams, marketing and management to likewise benefit.

This begs the question, what is the role of CRM technology in the daily workflow of the lawyer? It must be viewed as a tool to help them service client matters and win new client matters more effectively. If the CRM solution is tailored with that purpose in mind, the benefits to lawyers will be apparent and they will participate, ensuring the overall success of the implementation. Towards this end, leading CRM providers that have a keen understanding of these issues have developed the next generation of CRM systems that take a matter-centric approach.

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The Mother of Invention

All CRM solutions provide a certain level of contact management. They all provide a central repository to store notes, activities and other information about clients. They all provide some level of marketing functionality. The problem with most CRM solutions is that the lawyer is required to take extra steps, separate and distinct from the activity the lawyer is engaged in, to enter data into the system — and lawyers will not do this.

Matter-centric CRM solutions overcome this obstacle with innovative integration and functionality that focuses on the job at hand, rendering the software a necessity. For instance:

Winning New Matters: All lawyers — especially those interested in making partner — have to bring business into the firm. Except for the gifted few who enjoy rainmaking, most stumble through the non-billable process with little structure and efficiency.

Claiming the Opportunity: When a lawyer, Jane Tarnoff, learns of a potential new retail client, FloorMart, she wants to pursue the opportunity but must avoid potential embarrassment by ensuring that no one else in the firm has already initiated discussions.

> **(Manual):** After a standard conflicts check, Tarnoff contacts business development first to determine whether a formal pitch has gone out to FloorMart. When nothing is found, Tarnoff wants to ensure that informal discussions have not been initiated, so she sends out a mass-email inquiry. She has received no replies after a few days, so she's hopeful that this means she is free to pursue the opportunity.
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> **(Matter-Centric CRM):** From her familiar Outlook contact manager (or Lotus Notes or GroupWise) which is seamlessly integrated with the CRM solution, Tarnoff simply types "FloorMart" in the special imbedded "CRM

Search" window. She does not have to launch a separate application. The CRM system will return a fully integrated CRM window directly into Outlook with a tab marked Opportunities." By clicking on the tab the system reveals that no one in the firm is pursuing FloorMart as a client.

Background Research: The next thing Tarnoff must do is gather information about the company to better understand the prospective client's market and legal needs.

(Manual): To gather this information manually, Tarnoff must search the Web for relevant data on FloorMart, make calls to the marketing department to see if they possess background information and even search hard copy files for data on the prospect. The process could take hours or days depending upon how many people and resources are required.

(Matter-Centric CRM): Tarnoff types "FloorMart" into the system, which instantly reveals in-depth profile information on the company, as well as links to relevant external data and news sources that follow FloorMart. The process takes seconds.

Getting the Inside Edge: Knowing that many firms will be competing to win the same matter, Tarnoff wants to determine if any of her associates and colleagues have relationships with FloorMart that she can leverage.

(Manual): Tarnoff sends a mass email to everyone at the firm to determine if a relationship exists. Many lawyers are unavailable to respond in a timely manner. So the likelihood is high that a strategic relationship will be overlooked.

(Matter-Centric CRM): From Outlook, Tarnoff types "FloorMart" in the search window, and clicks on "Related Contacts." Via the CRM system, Outlook reveals all existing relationships between firm members and FloorMart employees. Tarnoff sees that a lawyer out of the firm's New York office has a close relationship with FloorMart's General Counsel. Tarnoff e-mails him and requests an introduction.

Matter Management and Administration: While most lawyers have some experience in the business development process, every lawyer can relate to the daily administration of a matter. Next-generation, matter-centric CRM solutions have emerged as mission-critical tools to render matter administration more effective and efficient.

Staffing the Matter: Tarnoff's first order of business is staffing the FloorMart litigation matter with the three lawyers and two paralegals needed. She needs to put together a team with the most experience related to this type of litigation.

(Manual): Tarnoff goes to her primary contacts in the employment law practice group to start the process of researching lawyer backgrounds and assembling a team. Given the firm's multiple offices, she's hopeful that she's able to uncover the most appropriate lawyers for this matter.

(Matter-Centric CRM): Tarnoff queries the CRM system for lawyers that have worked on employment-related class action lawsuits for retail clients. The system retrieves a handful of names, significantly reducing the time and effort she'll need to devote to staffing the matter.

Finding Experts: This matter will require expert testimony in the areas of age discrimination and psychology. Tarnoff must find the most compelling experts.

(Manual): Tarnoff calls her colleagues in her quest for the perfect expert, but they are not readily available and time is of the essence. She sends another mass e-mail to the firm inquiring whether anyone knows of relevant experts who can assist in this matter. Like other blast e-mails, responses are less than optimal.

(Matter-Centric CRM): A query of the CRM system's expert witness database reveals several potential experts. Tarnoff phones the colleagues that the system indicates know these experts. She quickly identifies the best candidates and makes contact to determine their availability.

Analogous Cases: To gain every possible advantage, Tarnoff's team wants to research past analogous cases the firm has worked on in the relevant jurisdiction.

(Manual): The team must work with business development and other firm contacts to uncover similar past cases, then have those case files located. They must then manually pour through the files to review pleadings, memos, case law and other details.

(Matter-Centric CRM): The team executes a query to look for other employment discrimination matters worked on which took place in this jurisdiction. In seconds the CRM system reveals three cases. By clicking on each matter name, it retrieves all matter-related data including parties to the litigation, people, companies, experts, judges and other relevant parties, as well as links to the document management system of relevant pleadings and documents created in connection with that matter.

Team Communications: Because multiple team members will be interacting simultaneously with clients, experts and other parties to the matter, coordinating these communications is essential to effective matter administration.

(Manual): Team members must remember to carbon copy each other on all relevant email and hard copy communications. Meetings, phone calls and other matter-related interactions must be summarized and communicated to relevant team members and placed in matter files. Failing to vigilantly keep track of all these varied interactions can lead to embarrassing errors or missteps.

(Matter-Centric CRM): Team members receive automatic "watch list" alerts from the CRM system whenever an activity related to any of the contacts involved in the matter occur. E-mails, notes from meetings and phone conversations, letters sent and all other communications are automatically delivered to users.

Distribution Lists: Tarnoff's secretary is in charge of compiling and maintaining the distribution list for the FloorMart matter. Failure to adequately compile or maintain this list could result in a critical miscommunication or omission.

(Manual): A word processing document or spreadsheet must be compiled with all relevant parties to the matter and their roles. Additions, subtractions and changes to the list must be constantly monitored to ensure proper distribution.

(Matter-Centric CRM): Distribution lists can be created automatically in the CRM system by linking relevant people and companies to the named matter. Letters, labels and other communications can be generated automatically. Because the list is linked to the central repository, any firm wide updates to contact information will flow down automatically to the distribution list, ensuring greater accuracy.

Minimizing Non Billable Time

As the above scenarios illustrate, when done manually the process of winning a new matter and administering it involves substantial amounts of non-billable time for lawyers. Moreover, the lack of automated processes to assist lawyers in these activities leads to inefficiencies and potentially embarrassing errors.

While CRM products vary widely in their quality and capabilities, the latest generation of CRM-centric solutions is specifically designed with the lawyer's daily workflow in mind, and offer specific functionality to streamline critically important matter administration functions. Combined with seamless integration with contact managers like Outlook, Lotus Notes and GroupWise, these systems become mission-critical tools that free up lawyers' time for more important, billable work — thus helping to assure adoption, use and ultimately ROI.