Minimizing Disruption To Clients During Law Firm IT Upgrades

By **Brad Paubel** (January 7, 2021)

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COVID-19 has brought with it some hard lessons about the state of technology at law firms. The rapid transition to remote working highlighted just how important a firm's information technology infrastructure is to operational stability, and how outdated systems and processes can backfire.

So, it makes sense that 2021 might see firms plan major IT overhauls, though some might still hesitate and worry about client disruptions. There are ways, however, to ensure that even the biggest technology upgrade has minimal impact on client service.

Start by identifying where all your law firm's data is stored.

The most important way to minimize client service disruptions during a tech transition is to start with a thorough assessment of where all of the firm's data is currently stored. Is everything on one central server or kept with a single cloud service, or is it in multiple places? Do attorneys and staff members keep any data locally on their own devices?

Only by knowing exactly where all its data is can a firm make informed decisions about how disruptive an IT upgrade will be. A firm that uses a mix of storage locations will face more challenges and will have to account for that in the transition plan. That doesn't mean there will inevitably be an impact on client service, but there will have to be additional steps taken to minimize it, as outlined later in this article.

Refine — or establish — processes for capturing data.

It's not enough just to know where a firm's data is stored. If it wasn't captured properly in the first place then it's going to make for a bumpier ride. No firm is ever perfect in this regard, and it's human nature to slip up now and again when handling data entry, naming files and creating folders — which can be a tedious and an unbillable task. Most firms, then, will have at least some remedial work to do.

So, before any actual transition happens, it's important to understand how data that would be involved in the transition was captured and organized and decide whether processes have to be refined — or even created for the first time.

The whole point of doing an IT upgrade is to improve internal operations, and the old adage of "garbage in, garbage out" really applies here. Taking time now to assess existing processes and establish new ones will not only pay dividends in the future but make for a far smoother changeover.

The areas to scrutinize for this assessment include client intake processes, file naming protocols and data storage organization. It's also a good idea to ensure that form fields are capturing as much information as possible, and that tags and other metadata are used properly and efficiently.

Once that's done, it's important to create easy-to-follow documentation that outlines specifically how everyone in the firm is to handle data input and organization. The focus here should be on making the process as seamless as possible so everyone follows it consistently and you're not left with a similar mess down the road.

Decide whether everything moves now or transitions over time.

The next crucial step in minimizing client disruptions is to take what was learned in the first two stages and then use that to guide decisions going forward. This is particularly the case when deciding how quickly the entire firm will move onto the new system.

If the firm's data is all in one place and there have been consistent processes in place for capturing and organizing it, then everything can likely make the move at one time. This is particularly true if the firm's legacy systems are not too outdated. In that case, it should be a relatively simple process to get all of the firm's data onto the new system at once and have staff members and attorneys start using it fairly quickly.

However, it's very likely that a firm will be dealing with less-than-ideal circumstances in terms of data storage and organization. Its current IT infrastructure might also not handle that data in a way that plays well with more modern technology. In this case, it might be best to adopt a two-stage approach and run both systems in parallel for a little while.

The way this could look is that from a certain day, for example, all client intake data is entered into the new system using the firm's updated processes. Older client files can then be slowly transitioned over. It will mean running two systems for a while, but the tradeoff is that clients should not experience as many disruptions in service. There will also be less risk of losing important files.

Some changes will be more disruptive than others — but with bigger benefits.

It's also important to recognize that certain IT upgrades will have a greater chance of client disruptions than others. The more of an overhaul the firm does, the more it will have to plan to mitigate impacts on service.

For example, adding an e-signature function to a firm's email system likely won't result in many problems, if any. It will be the same for any minimal change that doesn't replace core systems. Think of it like replacing the headlights or adding new rims to a car — there won't be any impact on how it runs.

However, if a firm is completely changing out its back-end IT systems — the engine, if you will — then that's a different story. Transitioning to a whole new IT infrastructure, whether housed internally or in the cloud, is a complex process with a lot of moving parts. There is much more opportunity in this situation for something to go wrong, and for clients to notice.

It's crucial in these situations to follow the above procedures and run both old and new systems in parallel while transitioning gradually. That's really the only way to ensure, as much as possible, that clients are unaffected.

This is probably also one of the reasons that firms are likely to put off such big shifts — too much risk of upheaval. Except, with the pandemic we have all seen the consequences of not doing so.

Transitioning to more modern systems that handle data properly will also go a long way to making any future shifts far easier with less impact. This must be weighed against any potential negative implications for clients. Doing a big upgrade now, as opposed to making cosmetic tweaks here and there to make do with outdated technology, will likely pay off in the long run for most firms.

Create a timeline, but plan for delays.

There's an old saying in military circles that no plan survives contact with the enemy — and that is very applicable to IT transitions. In this case, no carefully thought out technology shift survives contact with the day-to-day realities of doing business and running a firm. Things happen.

That's not to say you shouldn't have a plan and estimated timeline, but they should both factor in the unexpected. There is also a matter of scale to consider. An IT transition for a four-attorney firm already working with relatively current systems will be less complicated than one that involves hundreds of people in multiple offices.

A lot will also depend on how a firm is doing the transition. If there is a dedicated IT person or team that will live and breathe the shift, then it should go faster. For some firms though, it might be handled by an attorney or staff member with other duties, and things will take longer.

All things considered, a relatively complex IT transition can take considerable time. That's why it's important to have a plan that factors in contingencies — and communicate the potential for delays to all stakeholders in order to avoid widespread consternation if the schedule has to be adjusted.

Technology transitions don't have to be painful and disruptive.

Many firms hold back on making necessary IT upgrades because they worry about disruptions and the potential impact on client service as well as their attorneys and staff. That's understandable. However, not moving to more robust and flexible systems will be more disruptive in the long run.

IT growing pains don't have to be inevitable. While there may be hiccups, focusing on internal culture and making a diligent assessment of a firm's IT needs can make the process relatively painless. It's also important to make sure the move will serve the firm for many years into the future.

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