Chapter 3 - Networking and Group Computing

Strategic Workgroup Legal Applications

There are many strategic group-computing applications for the legal profession. In fact, all of the manual processes of practicing law are candidates for applying workgroup-computing principles. Workgroup computing essentially replicates the manual processes onto a computer platform, whether they are administrative or case related. Consider the following examples:

- *Law Firm Administrative Functions.* Administrative information in a law firm is interwoven with many office and case functions, and is a prime candidate for group computing. For example, client information is important for contact management, document preparation and management, timekeeping, billing, litigation databases, trial notifications, etc. A well-designed workgroup information system should share and route the same information among the different law firm functions. This can result in substantial timesaving as the manual work process or individual computer applications are reengineered onto a workgroup-computing platform. Now information will move in a workflow on a computer instead of being handled manually.

- *Collaborating with Your Clients.* Group computing can reduce time spent and provide higher quality workproduct for the client. For example, suppose a client is referred to your firm for preparation of a contract. You can immediately access the Internet for a voluminous amount of information about the business your client is involved in and the party with whom he wishes to contract. One can locate information on credit ratings, market or industry conditions and other background material. Legal forms on your network or the Internet can be used to locate clauses and whole agreements specifically addressing his/her needs. Using e-mail, it is easy to contact many of your colleagues from across the country to solicit input on specific contract issues or review of the contract. You will be more prepared to intelligently discuss the risk and benefits of your client's contractual needs. Information can be obtained, shared and discussed wherever your client is located using e-mail or real-time virtual meeting software such as Microsoft's NetMeeting. By taking advantage of electronic workgroup resources, you will service your client while tying your client and you closer together.
- *Case Management Tasks.* The all important case management tasks can be automated giving you calendar, docketing, and case management control. For example, when a case is opened, an electronic request can be sent to the accounting department to open an account. After conferring with the client, a case plan with assigned responsibilities is electronically prepared and sent to a secretary, paralegal, an associate, and anyone else associated with the case. Certain dates for completing the responsibilities can be assigned. The other workgroup members, when they access their computer, will see that they have been assigned responsibilities for a new case and their deadlines. They can electronically report on the progress or problems as they complete their duties. The communication will be constant and continuous between the members of your case team. Communication links can be set up with your client to provide status reports and obtain input on the case. Draft pleadings can be instantaneously sent to your client for review and comments. Docketing information can be obtained from the court electronically, and in some courts the pleadings can be "electronically"

filed.

- *Preparation of Litigation Discovery Requests.* Specific litigation tasks can be automated, reducing the paper jungle and providing control of your case. For example, the manual process of responding to interrogatories can be reengineered onto a computer. Once interrogatories have been received, they could be OCR'ed, if received in a paper format, and processed in a workgroup-computing environment. The interrogatories would first go to the lead attorney, who could provide the first draft of the answers and then electronically assign certain interrogatories to certain team members. Due dates would be placed on the responses and a set could be e-mailed to the client. The team members will locate and answer the interrogatories and communicate by e-mail with the client. After receiving the second draft, the lead attorney could "meet" electronically with his team members by video or document conferencing to finalize the answers. No more paper copies, postage, letters, in-baskets stuffed with paper; instead, the process would be completed electronically.

- *Sharing Litigation Materials.* Counsel, clients, graphic designers, and experts can now all share litigation information over secure virtual private networks with access into Extranets for the parties. This eliminates the necessity of e-mailing large graphic or other files to different parties.

Workgroup computing systems provide a unique and exciting opportunity. All of the work we do involves the interaction and sharing of information to achieve a common purpose. If the information is always electronically available and we can work as workgroups without being physically present, then the need for a "physical" place for a law firm is greatly diminished. This provides the foundation for the "virtual law office".