

Chapter 7 - Managing Litigation Information Using Technology

Rules of Thumb on Database Design.

Rules of Thumb on Database Design. Building a good database can offer a real sense of accomplishment. Many computer enthusiasts, after having been asked to put together a simple database, have explored the outer reaches of the program and have become the unofficial "database programmer for the organization." If you start to proceed down this road, keep some of the following rules of thumb in mind:

- *Decide What You Want From Your Database.* Focus, focus, and focus on the end results. What kind of information do you want and how should it be organized? Base your design on your end results. Don't expect to get dependable data out of your applications if you don't build in a place for the right information at the beginning.
- *Design Your Database on Paper First.* Once you know what information you want to collect, plan how the data will be organized. Write all the different types of information that you will be collecting in your case. For example, one database form may contain information about the documents in your case, another the legal pleadings, another the personal information on all persons connected to the case and another form for an action plan on what steps you will take in preparing the case for trial. When planning reports, keep in mind how the reports will look on the screen or on paper. Some programs only allow 80 columns and some monitors only display 24 lines at once.
- *Avoid Duplicity.* Do not collect the same data twice from the same document in different database records. You will save time and avoid data entry errors by only entering that data once.
- *Identify Each Record by a Unique Code.* Database management will be simpler if each record contains a field for a unique number - social security number, document number, witnesses ID code, etc. This will also simplify searches.
- *Break Information into Smaller Fields.* Any information you want to use for searching and sorting should have its own field. For example, if you want to sort your document database by date, then create a specific date field. If you include the date information in a summary field, you will be unable to create a chronology report of the documents.
- *Allow Adequate Space for Each Field.* Be generous when assigning field lengths. Try to anticipate the longest possible entry for that field. For example, it is suggested to allow at least 15 characters for first names, 20 characters for last names, 25 to 30 characters for addresses, two separate lines for addresses, city names should be 15 characters in length, state fields only have to be 2 characters, unless you have foreign addresses. If you find the field length is too short, most database programs permit one to redefine the field length without losing any data.

- *Position the Most Important Information at the Top of the Form.* This information will usually be an ID number, document date, etc. when you are entering information into a document database form. In witness information form so the last name, first name, etc. will be the important information.
- *Make Data-Entry Forms Readable.* Forms that are clear and easy to read reduce data entry errors. Don't crowd fields. Spread them out on a page. Try to keep them in a vertical line to permit easy viewing of the fields.
- *Arrange Fields Logically on the Form.* If you will be entering data from documents, set up the form to reflect the data that will be entered in a logical manner. For example, the name of the document and its condition would be some of the first fields on a form.
- *Set Default Entries for Commonly Repeated Data.* Some programs enable you to set a default entry for certain fields, which can be overwritten if necessary. For example, many of the witnesses in a case may reside in the same city, like Phoenix. You can save data entry time by making Phoenix the default value for that field and then having the information already entered in the field when a new form appears.
- *Test Your Database Before You Use It.* Create 10 or 12 records and produce the reports that you need. This dry run should uncover any deficiencies. It is imperative that the lead attorneys sign off on the database design and reports that will be generated.