

clutter. More importantly, as e-mail systems become more unmanageable, other expensive law firm information systems will become incomplete and irrelevant.

Solution: E-Mail Message Management

E-mail does not have the capabilities of law firm information management, case management, document management or knowledge management system—though it does transport that information. So law firms must find more effective means to filter, manage and control the rising tide of e-mail message clutter without disrupting the flow of business and practice. As a first step, law firms can reduce the volume of unnecessary internal messages by establishing e-mail distribution standards and by training people to communicate efficiently and effectively within the firm. (Just because you can send your memo to the whole firm, doesn't mean you should.) Some firms have had success devising action codes to designate importance or responsibility for action (*e.g.*, NRR: no response required; ACT: Alert Client Today; and RAL: Reply at Leisure). These initiatives may help lighten the load, but they do not solve the core problem.

Law firms need to devise a new strategy to accommodate the e-mail-centric law office, not only to reduce clutter, but also to restore enterprise value. Like it or not, if e-mail is where the lawyers are; it must be part of that enterprise solution. Each firm must find creative ways to extract, siphon or channel important content from e-mail message folders to their enterprise systems and databases where it can be efficiently stored, categorized and leveraged without disrupting the attorney's practice.

This may be as simple as designating a person in each practice group to receive, classify and post all relevant e-mail messages to a practice group collaboration area, or establishing a process for filing e-mail messages as documents.

Ultimately, the firm will have to consider using an automated intelligent broker service to anchor e-mail information in law firm enterprise systems while "pushing" notification of new postings to lawyer subscribers (on a per item, daily or weekly digest basis).

The most effective solutions will be built around e-messaging to retain its strength as a transport and notification system while channeling important information to enterprise information management systems that can better manage and leverage the firm's intellectual assets. Any process that requires the lawyer to leave e-mail to do work elsewhere will likely fail.

Channeling key information to reliable, categorized enterprise collaboration areas relieves the recipient of the time and stress of information management. When an attorney receives a notification, he or she knows the information is already safely stored for easy reference. By avoiding the unnecessary distribution of copies, the process clears mountains of information from lawyer mailboxes and eliminates the proliferation of dozens of copies to people who don't really need it.

Screen It. Reduce It. Channel It.

As long as e-mail remains a personal information management system, there will continue to be the need to screen and reduce the growing volume of external and internal spam that is clogging law firm mailboxes. By integrating e-mail message information with the enterprise system, great productivity gains can be made—by removing message clutter and leveraging the key information assets of the organization, individual attorneys and their firms alike can greatly benefit.

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About our author . . .

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