

LegalTech New York 2006

The Growing Role for Legal Administrators in Legal Technology: A Report from LegalTech New York 2006

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The annual LegalTech conference has been unveiling new products, services and trends in legal technology for the last 25 years. The 2006 event was a well-attended, even crowded, gathering of more than 300 exhibitors and thousands of attendees.

Of the thousands of people at LegalTech, lawyers made up only a small percentage. With so much happening in legal technology, especially in the area of electronic discovery, legal administrators will want to focus on more training for lawyers and getting some of them out from behind their desks to investigate and make decisions about the technologies that are changing the practice of law and the way law firms work.

The time is right for legal administrators to play an even bigger part in the legal technology process. This article gives you a few places to get started.

1. Electronic Discovery Everywhere. By some counts, about 5,000 current vendors describe themselves as being in the electronic discovery business. Perhaps 100 of them exhibited at LegalTech. No area of legal technology is likely to have a bigger impact on law firms in 2006 than electronic discovery.

Although electronic discovery may seem to be the realm of your IT and litigation departments, it will have serious implications for legal administrators.

First, sorting through electronic discovery vendors is no easy task. Expect to see vendor research projects, request for proposal (RFP) processes and tech committee or management committee involvement in electronic discovery decisions.

Second, the electronic discovery process is becoming so complicated that outside vendors, consultants and

other providers will inevitably be involved in the process. From readjusting budgets to simply handling requests for identification badges for outside providers coming to your office, you can expect electronic discovery to have a big impact on your day-to-day work.

Third, even firms that have had little experience with electronic discovery may be forced into action this year. Watch for staffing changes and the introduction of new positions for employees who focus on electronic discovery and litigation technology issues. Keep an eye on the growing trend of firms hiring litigation support managers.

Fourth, look for some of the techniques and requirements learned in electronic discovery to flow over into law firm administration – e-mail management and policies, archiving and related issues.

2. Security and Disaster Recovery Issues Did Not Go Away. Concerns about security and disaster recovery seem to ebb and flow. The 2005 hurricanes brought disaster recovery to the forefront and moved security concerns to the back burner. As time passes, security concerns will likely get more attention. However, neither issue ever goes away.

At LegalTech, you could find sessions and vendors focused on these issues. A trend to watch is a growing sense that handling security and disaster recovery internally may no longer be realistic. Law firms in New Orleans, for example, learned about the value of keeping data and backup systems in another part of the United States. Some firms report that their IT staffs are spending more than half of their time on security issues, leaving limited time for new projects.

Legal administrators are invariably involved in both of these issues. Expect a bigger role for outside vendors in both of these areas. One interesting product/service to watch is Network Box (www.network-box.com), which allows you to get state-of-the-art security outsourcing for a reasonable monthly fee.

3. It's a PDF World. PDF is becoming the standard format for electronic filing, scanning and electronic discovery. Recent stories about embarrassing revelations of "metadata" (hidden data associated with Microsoft Word and other files) have also focused attention on PDF as the preferred way to send documents outside firms without the same metadata concerns.

Many firms think of PDF only in terms of creating and reading PDF files. Adobe Acrobat 7 (www.adobe.com) provides a wealth of other tools – security, collaboration,

search and document management. Some legal programs, such as CaseMap (www.casesoft.com), let you integrate seamlessly with Adobe Acrobat and create PDF files as well.

Use of the PDF format makes sense in terms of dealing with metadata. Litera's Change-Pro (www.litera.com) is a suite of tools to help you work with PDFs and handle metadata.

PDF makes sense in many areas of law firm administration, especially external communications and for any documents that the recipients should not edit.

4. Outsourcing Becomes an Option in Almost Every Technology Decision. The sheer number of vendors and options can be overwhelming. It raises questions that many law firms are beginning to ask: What is our core business, and do we need to handle every technology function inside the firm?

From evaluating products and services to hiring qualified people, the technology questions inside law firms are getting more difficult. Add pressure from clients wanting firms to provide technologies like extranets and technology issues may move outside IT departments and into management committees and the realm of legal administrators.

With even the most basic law firm technologies, you could find vendors at LegalTech that provide the same services on an outsourcing basis. For example, companies like Pitney Bowes (www.pb.com) and Merrill (www.merrillcorp.com) will provide a variety of services, including handling your entire mailroom function.

5. Document Assembly in Nontraditional Ways. Some technologies shown at LegalTech may make sense for uses beyond what lawyers have traditionally considered.

Consider the example of document assembly. In a document assembly application, a user simply answers a series of questions on the computer screen and, as if by magic, the software generates a custom document based on the answers. Most law firms see it as a way to generate legal documents.

However, with today's tools from companies like Ixio (www.ixio.com), Microsystems (www.microsystems.com), Exari (www.exari.com) and DealBuilder (www.business-integrity.com/document-assembly.html), you might generate many of your standard administrative and other documents with these tools, saving time and effort and generating tailored documents. If you want to explore only one technology in 2006, document assembly is the one I recommend. ✨