

mobilizing Legal Professionals

One law firm reveals how it benefits from its attorneys' utilization of additional functionalities available on their BlackBerry handheld mobile devices.



BlackBerry handhelds from Research in Motion Ltd. now feature multiple application functionalities that make legal professionals' work a bit easier.

SHORTCUT

This case study reveals how one law firm empowered its attorneys to use the multiple functionalities of BlackBerry handheld devices, increasing their efficiency and boosting the firm's bottom line.

BY ALAN PANEZIC

In 2005, the International Legal Technology Association conducted its first technology survey among legal professionals from the corporate, governmental, not-for-profit and educational sectors. On questions about mobility and wireless access to e-mail, the findings showed that lawyers as a whole have embraced mobile technologies, with 90 percent of survey participants using one or more mobile device.

For most legal professionals, basic features in mobile devices – offering e-mail and Internet access, telephone service and organizer capabilities – deliver significant benefits. They improve responsiveness to clients and increase productivity for users, especially when they are away from their offices. After realizing the many benefits of enabling attorneys with mobile e-mail, firms are increasingly looking to leverage their technology investments in the wireless platform by mobilizing additional applications.

Time and billing tools are among the more common mobile applications that attorneys are deploying. Providing attorneys with the ability to enter billable hours anytime and anywhere can increase billings by 12 percent, according to estimates by the American Bar Association.

Among other benefits, customer relationship management applications also improve responsiveness to clients, allowing attorneys to access client information practically anywhere. Document management applications enable lawyers to access files on office networks so they may retrieve important documents as needed. Mobile devices can also provide access to the Internet, enabling users to conduct online legal research, access statutes and consult case law materials, public records and other legal resources.

One example of a legal firm that has broken new ground with wireless deployments is Morgan Miller Blair, a 32-attorney law firm in Northern California. The firm began by deploying BlackBerry

for e-mail, and then extended the capabilities with various applications.

Relying on end-user input, the firm enhanced its mobile capabilities by adding productivity tools to its existing BlackBerry platform. Leveraging existing BlackBerry technology and application development features, the firm's IT group developed mobile applications that placed full access to the enterprise at their attorneys' fingertips to deliver a competitive edge, improve client service and streamline operations.

Responding to its lawyers' requests for additional functionality on their BlackBerry handhelds, Morgan Miller Blair IT Director Jerry Stucki harnessed the advantages of BlackBerry MDS to deploy four productivity-extending solutions for the firm. BlackBerry MDS provides the technology to extend back-end enterprise applications to wireless handhelds. Stucki used this capability to make the firm's critical enterprise applications wirelessly accessible.

Working with its BlackBerry Solutions Provider, Connectione, and relationships with third-party suppliers Onset Technology and Avaya, Morgan Miller Blair developed applications that allowed its lawyers to enter time and billing data, access documents, wirelessly update timesheets and access the company's unified messaging, speech recognition, one-number bridge and Dictaphone systems – all conveniently on their BlackBerry handhelds.

METAmessage Legal, from Onset Technology, is a well-known application among law firm professionals, giving attorneys mobile access to case matters, LexisNexis and Westlaw research, a legal lexicon for spell checking and time-and-billing capabilities. Once METAmessage Legal was deployed, Morgan Miller Blair's lawyers were able to review documents on the company's servers and forward hard copies of materials to their clients without having to be in the office, eliminating the need for paper or cumbersome laptops and providing immediate access to their work projects.



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To track each lawyer's time, Morgan Miller Blair deployed METAMessage Legal's time-and-billing application, which allows lawyers to use the Time Tracker feature like a stopwatch. An attorney starts the clock when he or she starts working for a client – writing e-mails, researching on the Web or making a phone call – and stops it when done. The clocked time is automatically put into an electronic timesheet for the correct client. While each lawyer could manually enter the information into his or her timesheet, using METAMessage on the BlackBerry eliminated the need to remember every detail, allowing each attorney to account for every minute of the day, even while away from the office.

The METAMessage application also enhanced BlackBerry's attachment-reading capabilities by allowing faxes and image-only PDFs to be read on a handheld. An optical character recognition technology was added, which could convert faxes and image-based PDF files into text files readable on the BlackBerry handheld. The spell-check function, featuring a combined standard and legal dictionary, ensured the delivery of error-free messages.

In addition to enhancing document access and time-and-billing entries, Stucki extended the firm's use of Avaya's unified messaging and speech recognition capabilities to the BlackBerry handheld. Stucki worked with Avaya to enable the handhelds to recognize voice files. A notification of an incoming voicemail message is automatically forwarded to a handheld after arriving at the attorney's inbox. For easy access, a speed dial programmed on the handhelds meant users needed to press only one key to access their voice mailboxes. Stucki also enabled the use of Avaya's EC500, an Extension to Cellular solution, to bridge BlackBerry with the firm's landlines.

Incoming calls would thus ring on the office phones and the BlackBerry handhelds simultaneously – with an option to answer on either line and switch handsets without interruption during a call. With this new technology, lawyers had one-number portability, making the attorneys easier to reach and more accessible to clients.

Beyond this convergence of technologies, the firm also developed applications that synchronized the company's Dictaphone system and transcription service with the BlackBerry handheld. Traditionally, lawyers had dictated case information into a tape recorder and sent the tapes to the company's transcription service, where they were manually transcribed. To improve this process, the firm purchased a Dictaphone Enterprise Express system and programmed a speed dial on the handhelds to access the system. Now lawyers could dial into the Dictaphone system by pressing a single key and record notes directly through their handhelds. A digital file is automatically created when a call is completed, and the voice file is immediately routed to the transcription desk, ready for typing.

The advantages of BlackBerry's technology and functionality in the legal industry are well documented, and more than 80 percent of AmLaw 200 firms are now using the wireless handheld devices. Morgan Miller Blair is one example of a firm that has pushed the envelope of wireless handheld functionality beyond the traditional e-mail, phone, Internet and organizer capabilities. ✱

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