

Practice Management Software for Bankruptcy Practices



Integrating bankruptcy best practices with a strong legal practice management system can enhance service to customers and grow your bankruptcy practice

No one doubts the vital role legal software can play in a law firm's success. Many products are available on the market, but how can a firm choose the best product? And what about boutique firms with limited practice areas? Is there a special solution for these practices, particularly those specializing in consumer bankruptcy law?

These questions were answered recently in a presentation given by Tom Rowe, a leading consultant in the field of legal technology. After seventeen years of consulting following a career as a practitioner, Rowe has a deep understanding of legal software and its optimal implementation.

Rowe feels that legal practice management systems can offer many advantages to consumer bankruptcy practitioners. He also thinks these benefits have been overlooked by many lawyers in the bankruptcy field.

Trends In Bankruptcy Practice

Today, bankruptcy attorneys are feeling additional stress in their practices beyond other practice areas because of the Bankruptcy Abuse Protection and Consumer Protection Act (BAPCPA) and the state of the economy. When enacted in 2005, BAPCPA placed additional burdens on bankruptcy attorneys, requiring substantially greater data collection for the filing of a bankruptcy petition. The economic crisis and its aftermath have also resulted in a boom in the bankruptcy practice area, but this has also created the need for more control. Without the right software support, bankruptcy practitioners can feel overwhelmed and miss opportunities to expand their practices. The right software system can assist them with these additional responsibilities.

According to Rowe, more than 50 percent of all practitioners use practice management programs like Time Matters® software, but only 20 percent of bankruptcy attorneys do. Historically, bankruptcy attorneys have used programs like Act, GoldMine and Outlook. However, many of the legal features found in more sophisticated programs like Time Matters practice management software are unavailable in these general programs. Another less-than-optimal practice management tool for bankruptcy attorneys is petition preparation software. Although these programs are excellent tools for preparing the petition and related documents to file with the court, they do not provide the robust features found in practice management programs. Some offices have tried to cobble together their own systems by taking features from a number of different software applications. Rowe feels this is not a good idea. Attorneys are usually not software engineers. The time, expense and effort required to create a unique system by attempting to integrate different systems cannot be justified when comprehensive out-of-the-box solutions are readily available.

Why It Matters

According to Rowe, legal practice management software is the heart of the practice in the modern law office. It is the tool which attorneys use all day, every day. It is the first information technology tool turned on in the morning and the last to be turned off at night. As the core of a practice, it behooves bankruptcy firms to choose the best system.

Meeting Needs

To begin the process of choosing the most appropriate system for your bankruptcy firm, you must first review the role of legal software in your practice and what results you are hoping to achieve. Whatever the scope of your practice, certain basics apply. Among these is the successful integration of your legal practice

management software with a best practices system. Correctly integrated, such a system provides many benefits to a practice.

The main benefit is enhanced service for clients. The goodwill created by superior service can be essential in expanding your practice. Even without any increase in workload, a well-designed system will immediately increase your firm's efficiency and bottom line, and make managing your caseload much easier. A major plus of a good practice management software solution is its many safeguards, such as warning of impending appointments or other deliverables. Deadlines not missed, files not lost and steps not skipped equals less exposure to accusations of malpractice. Anything that can help prevent legal malpractice claims adds considerable value. Attorneys may actually realize a significant savings in malpractice insurance premiums in some states over time because of the safety measures a formal practice management system offers.

Realizing Benefits

According to Rowe, there are four key benefits that a practice management system can provide to a bankruptcy firm. The most important is the centralization of all the firm's information. The system becomes a digital filing cabinet for client information, deadlines, appointments, tasks, notes, documents, expense records, billing records and research. No more searching for files being used by other staff, misfiled documents, misplaced messages or inaccessible e-mails. Everything is logically organized and easy to find.

The second is that information can be shared with other staff members automatically. Making data accessible to all authorized staff, especially e-mails, can improve communication, avoid duplication of effort, and increase staff collaboration. Thirdly and closely related to the sharing of information is the need for security. A good practice management system will

enable you to restrict access to confidential material and control authorized users. Finally, the system makes information available anytime and anywhere enabling the attorney or staff to securely access centralized information from 341 meetings, court, home, or any other remote location.

Along with centralization and improved access to information, a good practice management system will also organize material in many different ways according to your immediate needs. It will sort cases by attorney or type. You can get a quick overview of caseloads. You can also create a timeline for all case histories. In addition, shared calendaring can make scheduling easier and notification more efficient.

So, you should be looking for a system that can save time, increase staff efficiency and satisfy clients by resulting in a better work product. A satisfied customer means increased referrals, an especially important source of cases for bankruptcy attorneys.

Where To Turn

In light of all these considerations, Rowe strongly recommends Time Matters software coupled with BKexpress®, the first comprehensive bankruptcy specific best practices system. As chief architect of BKexpress®, he chose Time Matters as the underlying engine because Time Matters is the best and most flexible practice management program on the market. Together with BKexpress' best practices for consumer bankruptcy firms, all needs of the consumer bankruptcy practitioner—from solo to the largest filers—are met. What are some of these best practices?

Comprehensive Records

When a potential client first contacts you, Time Matters initiates contact-related records. By using an action list, you can quickly bring up a rudimentary client information screen with appropriate data-entry fields, including the referral source. From this

screen, you can set up a follow-up appointment using a pre-defined template which also automatically adds the appointment to the calendar. The system offers many tools that allow you to create shortcuts like this, resulting in consistency in recordkeeping and efficiency in data creation. As a client proceeds through the steps from potential service consumer to actual income source, the system collects additional information, updates existing fields, and guides the attorney and staff step-by-step from the first contact to discharge. You can use case tabs to categorize cases as Chapter 7 or Chapter 13 as well as the current status of the case so that you always know exactly where your caseload is at any given time.

Other “housekeeping” details are also efficient and simplified. Documents such as taxes and pay stubs can easily be scanned into the system creating a paperless office. The software can be configured to pre-fill information into the appropriate forms. Form letters and pleadings can be easily completed merging the data in Time Matters into Word or WordPerfect documents. Any document can be placed into the system for immediate retrieval and safekeeping.

Billing and Accounting Features

What about billing? Systems like PCLaw® are integrated with Time Matters making it possible to handle the more comprehensive billing needs such as those found in Chapter 11 cases. However, Rowe is of the opinion that Time Matters' internal billing capabilities, coupled with the BKexpress' Billing system is sufficient for the billing needs of firms with Chapters 7 and 13 clients. With a bit of customization, the system handles payment plans, keeps track of all payments and balances, and distinguishes what is owed by the client from what is owed from the bankruptcy plan. BKexpress Billing moves cases from “waiting for payment” status to the “paid in full status” once the client balance has been paid. This reminds the practitioner to move on to the next step in the case

and ensures cases are filed quickly after the payment has been received. The BKexpress Billing system also tracks post-filing supplemental fees enabling many firms to easily capture additional revenue which many firms overlook.

The Right Choice

The benefits of enhanced legal practice software offering cradle-to-grave case service do not end there. The immediate saving may be the ability to expand your business without adding to staff, but there are less obvious bonuses. The system generates reports that can be used in staff evaluation and in determining the effectiveness of marketing expenditures by analyzing referrals.

For all these reasons, any bankruptcy firm seeking to expand its business must make the correct decision when it comes to selecting legal practice management software. And for bankruptcy attorneys; according to Rowe, the best choice is Time Matters with BKexpress®.

Know Who You Can Trust

At LexisNexis® we are committed to helping you spend more time practicing law and less time worrying about all the headaches of the business of law. Our solutions for small firms include award-winning software created with input from legal professionals and are backed up by a highly experienced and dedicated services and support team.

Case and matter management software like **Time Matters** makes it possible to manage a wide range of firm and personal communications—including e-mails, written messages, phone messages, faxes, mail and courier records—and relate them to a case, matter, project and client data. You can easily track incoming and outgoing deliveries in a searchable, sortable list. You can create a set of docketing rules and apply it to similar cases or matters. The items are related by dependency—for example, if certain tasks or calendared events are dependent on a trial date and the date is moved, tasks and calendared items not already completed can also be moved relative to the new trial date. And you can use Time Matters to turn collected data into meaningful information that will help you make insightful decisions on a case or for your business—to avoid liability and improve the bottom line.

This Best Practice article is based on the original *Growing Your Bankruptcy Practice* Webinar presented by Tom Rowe of OTB Consulting. www.BKexpress.com.

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