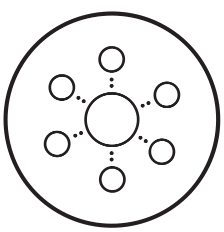
Choosing a Practice Management System: One Lawyer's Experience

by

BRIAN FOCHT – THE CYBER ADVOCATE

Choosing Practice Management Software

Odds are, if you are in a firm of more than one or two attorneys, your productivity and efficiency will end up getting a huge boost by adopting Practice Management Software.



- Everyone in the firm will have access to the case information
- Collaborative work becomes much easier
- Uniform systems ensure everyone is on the same page

Cloud-based Practice Management Services

Cloud-based Practice Management Services offer a number of advantages to small and mid-sized firms over traditional software:

- Low monthly subscription rates (oftentimes with reduced rates if paid in annual increments) mean no massive up-front costs to deal with

- Cloud-based systems are available anywhere – no hiring IT personnel just to set up secure portals to your new software – allowing for access to your case files wherever you go

- Cloud-based systems are constantly being improved and upgraded. Traditional systems are usually patched and upgraded annually, and may require you to purchase the new version in order to receive any support

- Since your information is all stored in the cloud, you don't have to invest massive capital expenses in big servers and storage

Where To Start?

Choosing the *right* cloud-based practice management system is more difficult. You're going to have to prioritize certain aspects of the software, because despite there being several excellent options on the market, none of them are *perfect*.

To determine which software is right for you, you're going to need a plan.

Evaluate your current situation and determine what your office's greatest challenges are. What problems are you trying to solve?

List the problems you'd like to solve, and rank them. This will help you set priorities when comparing the relative strengths and weaknesses of the available services.

Now, evaluate the systems abilities to solve your problems. ALWAYS try before you buy!

Still seem complicated?

Well, since I'm such a helpful guy, I'll show you how I followed this *exact* plan.

PROBLEMS THAT NEEDED SOLVING

1. I frequently need access to general case information, but frequently cant find the paper file.

2. I need to have basic status information on a case, such as upcoming deadlines and whether discovery was served, that is quickly accessible.

3. The contact information for my clients, other attorneys, adjusters, mediators and vendors are located in several different places—my Outlook contacts, my phone, and in the paper files.

4. When a person's contact info changes, I never find out about it until I change it in my contacts list.

5. Our calendar system is only really used individually – nobody is set up to check for conflicts.

6. Important deadlines frequently don't make it onto my calendar because no universal system is in place to set them up.

6. Without a document management system, unless I bring all the important case documents with me, anything important needs to be found by my assistant, scanned, and emailed to me (if I can even get it at all).

7. Paper files seem secure, but if I can't immediately locate the file, I waste time when I could be doing billable work.

8. We use the same documents case after case, but completely re-typing those documents (even just the particular information for that case) is time consuming.

9. I need documents to be prepared quickly, but without typos and copy/paste errors.

10. I know that we need to adopt a new system, but it's going to be difficult to let go of the system I know and have gotten comfortable with (despite its flaws)…

With these issues in mind, I checked out one of the top cloud-based law practice management systems available, Clio, alongside some other systems. Keep reading to see an honest assessment of what I like about Clio and areas where I welcome improvement.

CASE/ MATTER INFORMATION

PROBLEMS TO BE SOLVED:

• I need to have access to general case information without looking for a paper file.

• I need at-a-glance review of basic case information in a hurry.

From the outset, it is important for you to know exactly how crucial it is for you to have "one click" access to your case or matter information in your practice management software. The reason it's important is because all three providers that I've reviewed give you access, in one form or another, to all the basic information for your case.

If you're a civil litigator, the ability to immediately open any case file and see the names of all parties and important contacts, as well as a case calendar and significant amount of biographical information on each case is probably more important than if you're a transactional attorney.

WHAT THEY ALL DO

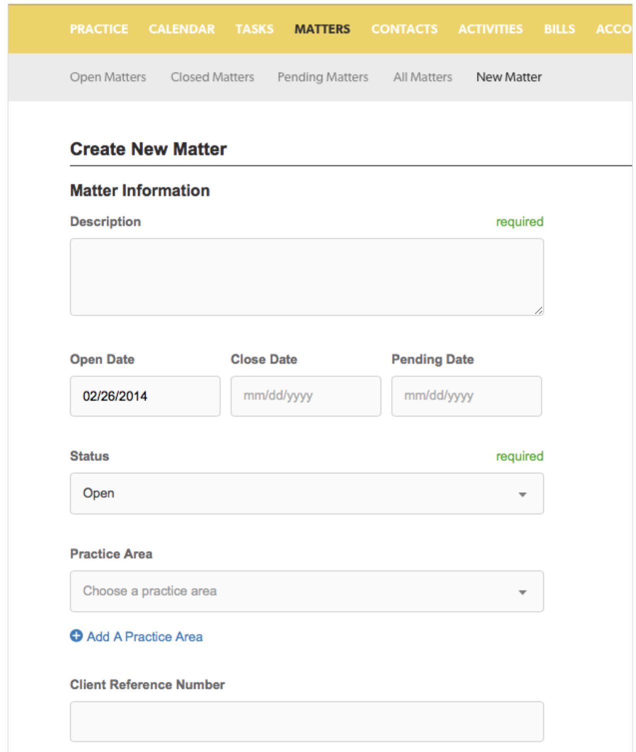
Provide access to information about your case, particularly upcoming events and calendar appointments, and access to the case contacts, documents, and basic information.

WHERE THEY ALL FALL SHORT

So far, none of the cloud case management providers have really come up with a system that is effective for multi-party litigation.

Clio provides a case/matter information page that, provided you don't add a large number of custom fields, can be viewed entirely without scrolling. Instead of navigating you away from the matters page to get to specific information, the bottom of the screen is dedicated to a series of tabs: Client, Transactions, Contacts, Tasks, Calendar, Notes, Time, Expenses, Documents, and Communications.

One of the nicest things about the case/matter information displayed in Clio is the ability to provide a case-by-case designation for your contacts. This ability is incredibly important if you practice in a field where people appear in your cases in different roles (such as attorney and mediator, depending on the case).



WHY I CHOOSE CLIO:

For my practice, Clio's matter management was the best combination of access to information, ease of use, and practical design. The ability to designate a contact as an attorney in one case and an arbitrator in another, or a treating physician in one case and an expert witness in another, is crucial in litigation.

CONTACTS

PROBLEMS TO BE SOLVED:

• I need to consolidate my rolodex, Outlook contacts, and case contacts.

• We need a firm-wide contact list, so that everyone has the same information.

Determining how important the contact management portion of your practice management system has to be can be quite difficult. All available systems will provide firm-wide access to your database of contacts, and all of them offer some level of integration with your active cases.

WHAT THEY ALL DO

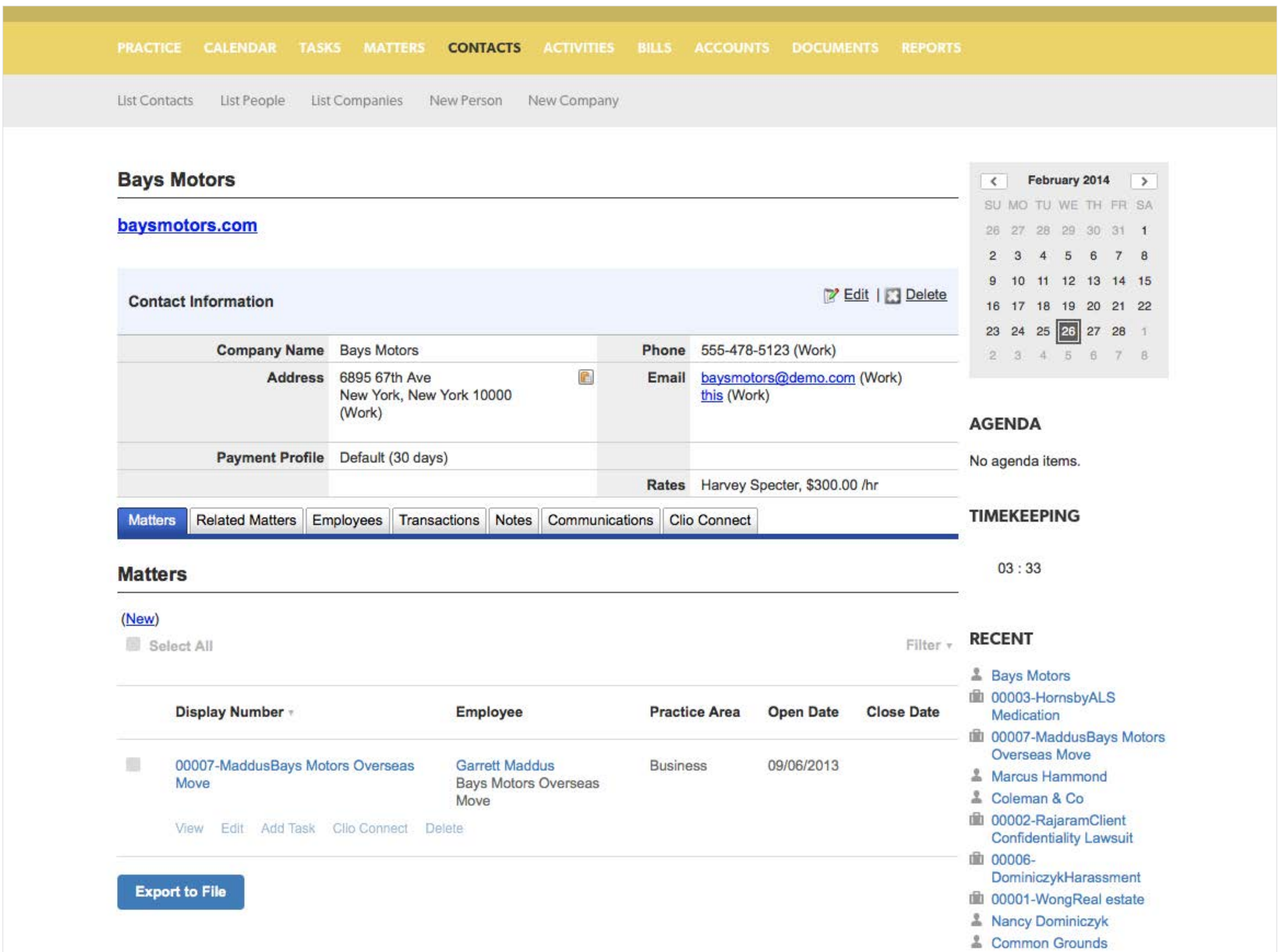
Organize your contacts into a searchable, firm-wide database, making sure that you always have the most updated address, phone number, and email for your contacts.

WHERE THEY ALL FALL SHORT

None of the services offer the kind of comprehensive contact information system as Outlook or other software that specialize in contact management. However, they all make liberal use of customizable fields, expanding the out-of-the-box functionality considerably.

Clio relies on a similar setup for their contacts as they do for case/matter information. The primary screen holds a contact's important information, while a series of tabs connects you to the more peripheral information. Tabs link to lists of: Matters, Related Matters, Transactions, Notes, and Communications. Of the three services, Clio actually offers the physical address fields for each contact (home, work, billing, and other).

My wish list for future Clio updates to contacts functionality includes the ability to designate a middle name or initial, to connect to a spouse, assistant, paralegal or boss without creating a custom entry, and to designate one of the addresses listed as "primary."



CALENDAR/ TASKS

PROBLEMS TO BE SOLVED:

• We need a firm-wide calendar that incorporates case information.

• I need a calendar and task list/to-do list that automatically incorporates certain deadlines for specific tasks.

The importance of a firm-wide calendar and task/to-do list feature is going to depend a lot on your firm's culture. How many attorneys and staff your firm has is important, but more so you need to evaluate how much collaborative work you have between attorneys and staff. How frequently do associates work with more than one partner, and how often do you find you need to assign tasks to someone without speaking to them in person?

The more you rely on collaboration, and the more people you have working on each case, the more important a firm-wide calendar and task management system will be.

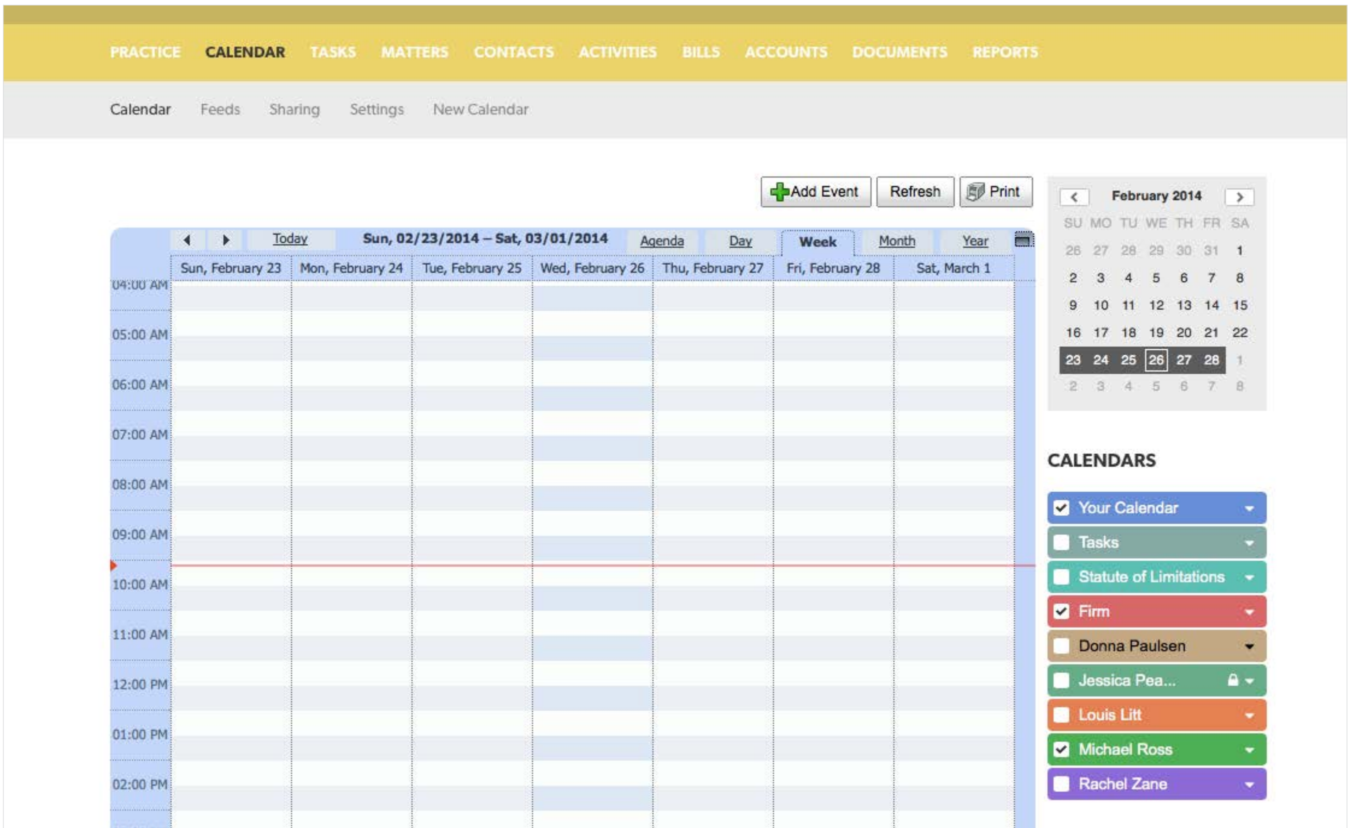
WHAT THEY ALL DO

Provide a firm-wide calendar and task management system, sortable by attorney and by case, with options for assigning events or tasks to particular contacts.

WHERE THEY ALL FALL SHORT

Expansive functionality. The calendars do essentially all the basics, but while they touch all the bases, the ability to link to more than one contact is a problem each service has.

The calendar system in Clio is the perfect illustration of what I just discussed. The calendar is clean and clear. It's easy to understand and easy to navigate. Clio couldn't have done more to make it easier to create a new event or task, assign it to a particular case, and assign it to a particular attorney.



DOCUMENT MANAGEMENT

PROBLEMS TO BE SOLVED:

• I need all important case documents organized and available while I'm on the go.

• I want to be able to securely store my important documents, while being able to access them quickly and easily.

Evaluating how important the document management capabilities of your practice management system will likely come down to one major question: does your firm already employ a document management system? If so, and it's cloud-based, the functionality of the document management portion of your system will not be a high priority. On the other hand, if your DMS is not cloud based, or you have yet to implement a DMS system, the capabilities of your practice management service become considerably more important.

Once you've determined your firm's overall need for cloud-based document management capabilities, you'll want to ask a few additional questions: First, how important is it to you that all documents related to a case are accessible remotely? Second, is integration with services like Dropbox or Evernote important? Third, do you routinely rely on reviewing groups of documents, such as pleadings or correspondence, in order to quickly update yourself on the status of a case? Each of these questions will help determine which service is going to be most appropriate for you.

WHAT THEY ALL DO

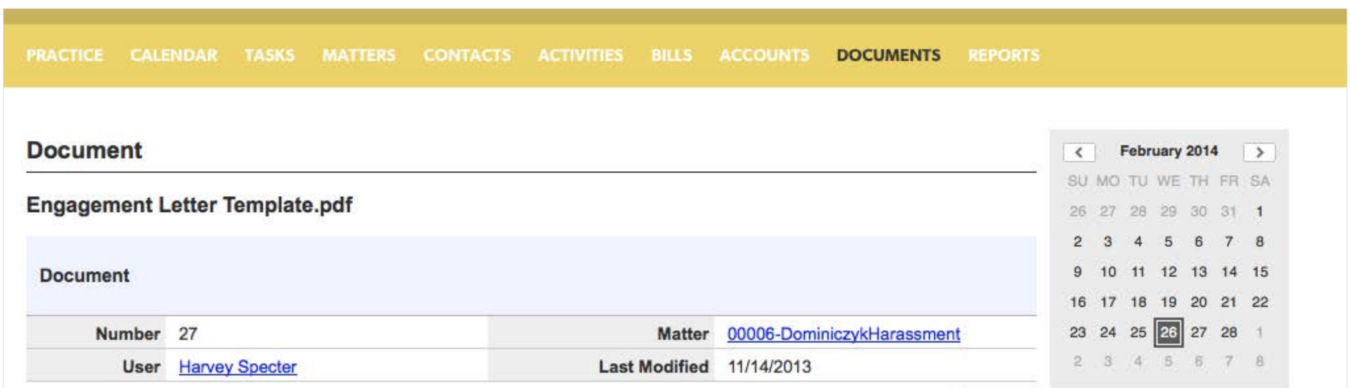
Allow users to upload electronic versions of documents and link the documents to particular cases.

WHERE THEY ALL FALL SHORT

They all lack the ability to link between documents, and the sorting and organizing capabilities are generally limited.

The document management system in Clio is generally well designed and easy to navigate. Boasting integration with Net Documents, Dropbox, Box, and Google Drive, Clio offers a wide variety of ways to import documents. Even if you don't use one of these cloud-based storage platforms, uploading documents directly to Clio is incredibly easy to do. Right away, Clio comes with a list of document categories to better organize your documents, and they're entirely customizable. You're also able to save multiple versions of single documents, just in case that first draft was really your winner.

The weaknesses for Clio include the universal weakness for these systems in that documents cannot be linked together. For example, if you want the Complaint and Summons to be linked together, or discovery requests linked with the letter serving them, they have to be saved as one document. Additionally, Clio's category system does not allow you to sort based on multiple categories, meaning if you rely on reviewing documents to refresh yourself on a case, to see them in chronological order you're going to have to create incredibly broad categories.



WHY I CHOOSE CLIO:

Clio's document management comes with a categorization system out-of-the-box, so to speak. By allowing customizable categories for documents, users aren't restricted to a "tag" system like other services provide. Firms that are truly dedicated to universal organization will likely find the Tag system offered by other services useful, but rigid adherence to organizational conventions will be required.

DOCUMENT AUTOMATION

PROBLEMS TO BE SOLVED:

- We use the same documents case after case, but we need to speed up the process.

- I need documents to be prepared quickly, but without typos and copy/paste errors.

Depending on your firm, document automation may be hugely important or completely irrelevant. However, if your practice involves routinely preparing the same or similar documents in different cases, there's no doubt you'll benefit to some degree from document automation.

When it comes to automation, you really only get out of it what you put into it. Unlike the other elements of your case management system, this one is going to require considerable time and energy at the front end, with little or no immediate gains. In fact, you're likely to spend considerable time dealing with little errors, tinkering with your templates for quite a while before you get them right. Many people give up. However, those that don't will see considerable benefits down the road.

WHAT THEY ALL DO

Allow users to create templates that auto-fill information from specified data fields within the case.

WHERE THEY ALL FALL SHORT

They all rely to some degree on creating custom fields in order to fully automate document creation as effectively as traditional law practice management software. Additionally, they all have considerable problems with multi-party cases.

Clio boasts the widest variety of template types of all three services. Users can create templates in .doc, .docx, .xls, .xlsx, and .ppt formats. Clio also makes a considerable number of fields available immediately out of the box, and any custom field added to case/matter information or contact management can be utilized in document automation.

Want to have a template that includes the opposing counsel's name and address (such as in a letter or in a certificate of service), you're going to have to create a custom field within the case and list them there as well.

DRAPER LAW

601 East 54th St
New York New York 10000

11/14/2013

2875 35th St
New York New York 10000

RE: Harassment

Dear Nancy Dominiczyk,

As of 09/01/2013, I have agreed to represent you in connection with matter 00006-DominiczykHarassment. This matter is regarding your divorce from your Spouse, **<< Matter.CustomField.Spouse.Name >>**.

At this time, I want to thank you for selecting my law firm to represent you in this matter. I also wish to set forth our agreement as to payment of my fees. My fees for legal services are $500.00 / hour, plus any expenses that may be incurred, such as filing fees, deposition charges, copying costs, postage, and related expenses. My office will bill you approximately monthly depending upon the amount of work that

INTANGIBLES

PROBLEMS TO BE SOLVED:

• I'm used to my current system. It may be inefficient, but at least I know how to use it and where everything can be found... (most of the time)

This particular issue is probably both the least and most important to address when considering moving your firm's practice management to the cloud. While it doesn't directly reflect any particular feature set or capability of each service, and therefore gets ignored by a lot of IT advisors, comfort is very important. A steep learning curve and unfriendly user interface will discourage you and your firm from taking full advantage of the system's tools. On the other hand, a program that is easy to learn, with an intuitive interface, encourages use. Moreover, being able to see and understand the benefits you get, without having to run a productivity report or a prebill, are also hugely important.

Never buy the first product you try. Each one of these services has some version of a free trial. I strongly encourage you to take advantage of that option, and determine which system works best for you.

WHY I CHOOSE CLIO

Overall, I found that Clio was probably the most intuitive system for my tastes. The clear preference for making information available without having to navigate to different screens is huge for me, and Clio's efforts in this area have paid off.

About the Author:

Brian Focht, The Cyber Advocate, is a civil litigation attorney in Charlotte, North Carolina at the law firm Stiles Byrum & Horne, LLP.

A graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the Wake Forest University School of Law, I have been practicing since 2007, with a focus on litigation and trial practice. Although my main focus area is on insurance defense litigation, particularly motor vehicle negligence and professional malpractice, I also have experience in business & commercial litigation, patent/trademark/ copyright law, trade secrets infringement, and premises/product liability.

In addition to practicing law, I am the co-owner of B&R Concepts, LLC, a business consultation company. Along with co-owner Ryan Maltzen, we provide information systems and information technology solutions to small businesses in order to increase efficiency, streamline processes, and improve profitability.

The common thread through all of my endeavors is a belief in logistical efficiency through technology.

Want to see more on why I chose Clio over the competition, read the longer comparison article on my website, The Cyber Advocate.

Clio

Try Clio for FREE.

www.clio.com/signup