
How to Start a Law Firm

The Best in Basic
Law Office Technology¹

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lawofficeSuperstore.com
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Case Management Systems	2
Invoicing (Time & Billing)	4
Accounting	5
Full-Integration Accounting	6
Security Software/Products	8

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Case Management Systems

Case management programs perform two basic functions for a law office. They organize client information in a data base so that at any time any member of the firm can get detailed case information. Also, case management software serves as the company calendar, keeping the attorneys and staff on time for every appointment and due date.

The concept of merging client data with a calendaring system is not unique to case management software. Many generic office products like Microsoft's Outlook perform that function for general business systems. However, case management software goes beyond basic scheduling software by offering overlapping schedule reminders and other features that only an attorney could want (like quick conflict checking).

Whereas most generic office products organize data with the assumption that the user has just a few ongoing projects at any one time, case management software recognizes the principle that an attorney may be responsible for hundreds of cases simultaneously, each with its own timeline.

In its most simplest form, a basic case management system will replace paper calendars, rolodexes, timesheets, notepads, manual tickler systems, and telephone message pads. More ambitious case management products will attempt to replace all other accounting and invoicing systems as well as all the client files.

Most importantly, a case management system will streamline your office automation process so you only have to enter certain client information once. The data will automatically merge with other information systems such as time and billing products, and document assembly programs, so you don't have to re-enter the client data in any other office system.

For small to mid-size law offices and solo practices, there are three very popular case management products that dominate the market: Abacus, Amicus Attorney, and Time Matters. There are several other products available, but they generally resemble one of these three systems, and their total sales make up less than 10% of the market.

Amicus Attorney www.amicusattorney.com

Amicus is perhaps the most intuitive and user-friendly case management program on the market for law firms today. Amicus made its mark in the legal community when it redesigned the typical user-interface of a case management product and created a dynamic, full-featured software application that is easy for anyone to learn. Amicus now leads all other case management products in sales to small to mid-size law firms and solo practices.

Amicus comes highly regarded by lawyers and critics. In 1999 the readers of Law Office Computing Magazine selected Time Matters as Best Case Management product.

The costs to install Amicus in a small to mid-size law firm is about average for a case management product in a small law office – about \$300 per user.

Time Matters www.timematters.com

Time Matters made its mark in the legal community when it was the first case management product to come out in a Windows format at an affordable price. The competition has been trying to keep up with Time Matters ever since.

Time Matters is the most award-winning law office software. In 1998 and 1999 the readers of Law Office Computing Magazine selected Time Matters as Best Case Management product. For the past three years Time Matters was voted Case Management Product of the year by the TechnoLawyer Internet Community.

Most purchasers of Time Matters are usually surprised to find out that the product is also one of the most affordable case management systems available. A small office network can be purchased for under \$1000 – about a third of the cost of competitor products.

Invoicing (Time & Billing)

For most law firms, investing in an accounting and invoicing system is not always an easy decision. Firms are faced with many issues that go well beyond whether the software will be affordable and easy to use. Even deciding which month of the year to purchase the system is crucial for some firms trying to make a smooth accounting transition.

Although they are often referred to as part of the same system, invoicing and accounting software systems are typically sold separately. Manufacturers began creating these separate software packages recognizing that many firms may already have a trusted accounting system, but they may have wanted a compatible invoicing system that would have dynamic features that go beyond simple bill templates.

Invoicing systems (often referred to as time & billing systems) are usually designed for ease-of-use by the firm timekeepers. After all, if a timekeeper doesn't find the electronic time sheet or timers easy enough to use that they do not become habit forming, then they will be inadequate compared to the paper systems they are designed to replace.

For most people posting time through the use of an electronic time sheet, they are simply required to report three things: the client name, the activity performed on behalf of the client, and the duration of the activity. But the advantage to a computerized time reporting system is that the users will have the ability to access many more invoicing variables on a bill from their own desk.

In theory, a good time and billing system will allow the firm to recover costs currently lost from underestimating the actual time it takes to accomplish certain tasks on behalf of a client. However, to achieve this kind of success, the timekeepers within the firm must all participate through the use of the electronic reporting system, and its use must become habit forming.

From a risk management perspective, the use of electronic time keeping systems can go along way toward building better attorney/client communications. A client's lack of comprehension as to the work that was performed by the attorney can lead to distrust and misunderstandings. Electronic timekeeping alleviates the sense of distrust by providing the client much more detailed information on the

invoice as to the work that was performed – right down to the exact duration of telephone calls and meetings.

Timeslips www.timeslips.com

Timeslips Version 10 is the worlds best selling and most award winning time & billing program. Since it was first created in 1985, no competitor has been able to match this invoicing application for its ease of use and comprehensive invoicing features. Versatile invoicing capabilities include a variety of billing methods and fully customizable bill formatting. It also provides precise time and expense tracking with its built in timer.

To get started, you choose the legal profession from a menu and Timeslips automatically creates the correct format for your office. Timeslips uses a navigator flow-chart to give you access to the basics in the program, such as billing and reporting. For the timekeepers, all they need to learn is the Timer, which only requires the user enter a file name, the task, and the duration of time to be billed.

Accounting

For small to mid-size law firms, many of the off-the-shelf accounting systems that are available at Best Buy, Comp USA, Circuit City and Office Depot are more than adequate for their accounting needs. They are generally easier to learn than products designed for large businesses and there are many resources available, like "QuickBooks for Dummies" that make the training easier.

Chances are, your accountant is already familiar with how they function, but perhaps the best reason of all for considering an off-the-shelf system is that they are affordable – averaging about \$180.

Even some software applications designed for home finance may be adequate for certain solo attorney shops because their bottom-line features are far more comprehensive than the reporting and layout abilities that a manual accounting system has to offer.

No ethics decision has yet to report that an attorney was deficient in their responsibilities to their client simply for not having a computerized accounting system in place, yet, as if to endorse modern methods of record keeping, the Lawyers

Professional Liability Board of Minnesota has published and distributes to members of the bar a guide to setting up Quicken and QuickBooks for law firms. (These guides may also be obtained from Mutual Software by request)

A law firm is usually not at a disadvantage for purchasing an accounting system designed for general businesses. In most of these packages, the set-up process includes an interview where the attorney indicates that the program will be used by a law firm, and as a result many of the record keeping functions that are needed for a typical law office are automatically installed.

QuickBooks www.intuit.com

QuickBooks by Intuit is probably the most well-known of all accounting software applications. Like its home finance counter-part Quicken, it is wildly popular among record keepers for its ease-of-use, and its ability to merge with other well-known office products.

QuickBooks contains the features of Quicken and Quick Pay, upgraded with all the accounting features necessary for a small business. The program speeds up bill paying and invoicing by learning recurring bills and invoices. QuickBooks is feature rich with mini-applications that creates estimates, integrates time tracking, and helps you compare estimated costs to actuals, and much more.

When linked with a time and billing system like TimeSlips Deluxe, the product can maximize the reporting features of the time and billing product, while managing the firm accounts and the company payroll databases.

Full-Integration Accounting

There exists a line of accounting products that are designed to deliver all the features of a high quality invoicing product along with the basics of a full featured accounting system. They are referred to as "Full Integration" accounting systems and several are designed specifically for law firms.

For some consultants, it doesn't make sense to recommend separate accounting and billing products, even if they are designed to merge together, because these high quality, full-integration accounting products exist. However, we have found that after years of discussing purchasing decisions with our clients, that many times an attorney will be satisfied with one aspect of their current set-up, like invoicing, yet they want a new ledger that will work well with the invoicing system.

Also, if ease of use and educational resources are important to the firm purchasing an accounting system,

then an off-the-shelf product will have some advantages to a full-integration accounting system. It may be more costly to find adequate training for a full-integration accounting product since there are fewer people using them.

The advantages of a full-integration accounting product are significant. The merge capabilities between the invoicing and ledger sides of the product are never in question since they are obviously made by the same manufacturer. Also, since they are made for law firms they come fully equipped with accounting code descriptions and trust accounting features that only a law firm could use.

A distinctive advantage to purchasing a higher-end, "all-in-one" product is that you tend to receive good service and support for your purchase price. The manufacturers of TABS III and PC Law Jr. – two well-known products of this type – are considered unsurpassed for their client telephone support.

These products tend to cost more since their attorney purchasers represent a niche market. They start at around \$300 and the cost of these systems can increase depending on the "modules" that a firm would need. The higher cost can be palatable when considering the fact that these systems are comparable to purchasing two separate accounting and invoicing products.

PC Law Jr. www.pclaw.com

Looking for a do-all system at a small firm price? When you compare features, pricing and support, you will agree that PC Law Jr. is the best value in legal accounting software.

PC Law is a first-rate time and billing product with an integrated accounting module built exclusively for law firms. It is a complete solution for firms looking to get away from the multiple product approach to invoicing and accounting

Alumni's technical support service is unmatched in the legal software industry so getting help is never a problem. Alumni also provides conversion tools and case management links to Time Matters, Amicus and Palm.

Security Software/Products

Many of the tools that are necessary for preserving client data from accidental (or purposeful) destruction are available at inexpensive prices.

To emphasize how affordable these products are, we put together a "Wish List" of top-of-the-line data privacy and security products that total under \$350. For that price, you can have a complete, state-of-the-art security suite of products diligently protecting your client information. The price seems even more insignificant when compared to the cost of down-time when you are trying to replace damaged or lost computer data.

Most of the products listed here are easy to find at a local computer software supplier such as Best Buy, Comp USA, & Computer City.

Colorado Tape Backup www.zones.com. www.hp.com

If you were only going to purchase one data-saving product, this is the one. A tape backup drive on your computer system copies all your computer data and will save you if your client data is accidentally destroyed. A tape-based system will go beyond the backups of individual files that is possible with CD's and super floppies by taking a snapshot of your whole computer system.

The PC Zone offers the HP Colorado 8 GB Internal backup drive with tape for \$199. You'll also want to buy at least two additional tapes (about \$10 each) so you can maintain at least a three tape rotation of routine and full-system backups. External tape drives are also available at

slightly higher prices but they tend to take more time to do the job.

McAfee VirusScan www.mcafee.com

It is good to have a healthy fear of computer viruses. They are very common and can quickly cause a severe loss of client data. As viruses are getting more complex, you are now vulnerable to receiving one simply by opening an e-mail that was clearly sent from a friend. A virus detection program will scan incoming e-mail, as well as the program files on your hard drive and floppy disks to locate and remove a virus quickly. McAfee is one of the premier names in virus detection software and it rates high for its ease-of-use. McAfee's VirusScan 4.0 sells for \$20, but don't be surprised if you can get it for free after rebate. Such incredibly low prices for virus detection software are recouped through their online virus update service which you can register for an additional fee.

Password Safe www.counterpane.com

If you are not already using passwords to gain access to your computer system, implementing this basic measure of security is the simplest way to control who views your client's data. Remember, the most common way hackers get into your computer is through your keyboard when you are not there. Avoid unwanted visitors by implementing uncommon passwords and changing them regularly.

To make the job easier, download the Password Safe, free of charge from Counterpane Systems. The program was designed by an internet security specialist who wanted to make a simple program that held all the passwords you may have in one place. If you have previously registered to the Wall Street Journal's web site, but you can't remember what your password is, all you have to do is click on the entry in the Password Safe and then click again in the web-site password field. It's that easy. The Password Safe will even generate random case-sensitive passwords for you instantly.

BlackICE Defender www.netice.com

If a software intruder doesn't hack into your computer through your keyboard, then they will probably try it through your telephone modem. You can stop them cold with a fire wall program like Network ICE's BlackICE Defender. Previously, this type of product was expensive and complicated to install. Network ICE changed all that by creating a monitoring engine that requires no configuration and can scan all your inbound PC traffic for suspicious activity. If such activity is found, BlackICE will

initiate a back trace to help nab the hacker just prior to slamming the door on his face. The product retails for \$39.

PGP Encryption web.mit.edu/network/pgp.html; www.mcafee.com

PGP is an acronym for Pretty Good Privacy. At \$20, this product is not only effective but inexpensive. This encryption device ensures that, by simply clicking a button on the toolbar, only the intended recipient of the e-mail can read the message. Your client is able to read your message through the use of a "key" that they use to open your e-mail. If you are already required to use an encryption product by your local bar, PGP Personal Privacy v6.5.2a is world famous for military-grade encryption algorithms. MIT also distributes a freeware version of PGP for personal, non-commercial use. Just don't try to take PGP out of the country because it is subject to export control laws. It's *that* good.

Defcon 1 Notebook Security System

www.dell.com; www.compu-lock.com

If you decide to add security to a notebook computer, or any other vulnerable PC, there are several products that ensure your computer won't get too far out of your site. A simple locking cable system by Targus is available through Dell for \$27, and it will lock your laptop to the leg of any secure object. Targus's Defcon 1 Notebook Computer Security System (Dell \$49) is another cabling product that lets out a 110 dB ear-piercing shrill when the cable is cut or the motion sensor is activated. Also, if you want added security for your computer bag while you are traveling, the TravAlert Mobile Alarm System makes your computer bag motion sensitive to everyone but you.