Can Law Firms Use Outlook for Practice Management?

By Seth G. Rowland, Esq.
Microsoft Outlook is ubiquitous. Practically every lawyer uses Outlook — and for much more than just managing email. In fact, the American Bar Association, in its 2011 Legal Technology Survey, found that about 80% of lawyers use Outlook for calendaring, contacts, and task management. For many lawyers in law firms of all sizes Outlook serves as their practice management system.

Given the many excellent legal-specific practice management systems available (some for decades with many fans in their own right), why is Outlook so dominant? A number of reasons exist, including:

- Outlook is the “gateway” for email. Email is how lawyers communicate with their clients, opposing counsel, and everyone else in their lives. Accordingly, Outlook is how lawyers send and receive documents and in some cases even faxes. Simply put, it’s the workflow engine of the modern law office.

- Outlook is the gold standard for working with smartphones. Before the data can appear in your smartphone, it must first appear in Outlook. Most smartphone synchronization technology assumes that the user has either Outlook or Exchange Server.

- Outlook is “free” with Microsoft Office. Who can beat bundled software?

- Outlook is what lawyers already know. Lawyers are busy so they understandably prefer to work within their comfort zone rather than learn new software, which could require changing their workflow.

This love affair with Outlook all seems great on paper plus 800,000 or so lawyers can’t be wrong, right? Unfortunately, there is a downside. Law firms don’t know what they’re missing. And because of the changing nature of law practice, relying on Outlook grows riskier by the minute.

Deconstructing Your Law Practice: Where Outlook Falls Short

Law practice consists of five key information components, each of which is described below. Outlook simply lacks the tools law firms need to efficiently manage this information.

1. Organization by Clients and Matters

There’s a difference between a “business card” and a “client file.” In Outlook, contacts are linked to companies, but not to files (clients and matters). In fact, nothing in Outlook is linked to client files. This concept — the very essence of legal practice management — doesn’t exist in Outlook. There’s no hidden “preference” you can turn on to make it so.

2. Calendar

Lawyers work in groups, even if the group consists of a single lawyer and a secretary. They meet with clients, work to meet deadlines, and appear in court or elsewhere depending on the nature of their practice. Ideally, your calendar should be shareable and organized by client and matter. If you
use Exchange, you get the former but not the latter. If you use only Outlook, you’re completely out of luck.

3. Communications
In Outlook, all communications are equal. You can create flags, folders, and rules but they only go so far. In a law practice, client-related communications need priority. Internal messages, telephone calls, and voicemail are part of the collaborative experience. These need to be included along with email, and your most important communications need to be separated from the “noise” of your overstuffed inbox by being attached to client files.

4. Billable Time
With so much of the “work” of law practice residing in email, you need a way to keep track of billable time, and an easy way to convert activities into time entries and then into invoices. Even with flat fee billing, you need to measure productivity and profitability by tracking time. Outlook doesn’t track time, manage retainers, generate bills, etc.

How Credenza Transforms Outlook Into a Practice Management System
Outlook is an email program and personal information manager. As we can see from the above exercise, it’s actually too “personal” for a law practice because all the information remains “private” for each user. Even with Exchange, Outlook is not a practice management system. While Outlook has some functionality with regard to calendar, contacts, and communications, it completely lacks the concepts of billable time and client matter management. These shortcomings seriously detract from Outlook serving as your practice management system.

That said, don’t dismiss Outlook out of hand. Microsoft has spent nearly two decades building Outlook. No small legal software company can match its core functions. Instead, consider adding to Outlook the legal-specific features it lacks.

Your law firm can rely on Outlook by incorporating it into a larger whole that understands the legal profession and supplies the missing dimensions.

5. Centralized Management
Lawyers are expected to work on many matters at the same time. With so much information in electronic form, the days of having an entire client file in an accordion-like folder have ended — but it’s not all in Outlook either. You need centralized, quick access to everything discussed above and more — appointments, documents, email, notes, tasks, telephone calls, time entries, invoices, and payments.

With Credenza, you don’t get practice management plus Outlook, you get practice management inside Outlook — just one place to go for everything you need.
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Credenza is an Outlook add-on (plug-in). It enables you to keep using Outlook for what it does best, while adding the practice management features it lacks. In fact, Credenza adds so much to Outlook that the combination surpasses the functionality of many standalone practice management systems. Below I discuss three of Credenza’s core features.

1. Client/Matter Management and Collaboration
Credenza enables you to assign anything in Outlook to a client and matter, and also share that information with colleagues — appointments, contacts, email, notes, tasks, etc. Your dental appointments remain private, while court appearances and deadlines become shared. Normally, such sharing requires expensive server software and accompanying hardware.

Credenza eliminates the need for such an expense. Instead, Credenza uses Azure, Microsoft’s enterprise-class cloud database service. Unlike other cloud-based practice management systems, your data remains on your computer. Credenza uses the cloud to keep everyone in your law firm in sync (including your home computer). Also, all this syncing occurs in the United States thanks to Microsoft. Credenza is a new breed of software referred to as “hybrid cloud,” marrying the benefits of traditional software with the Internet.

2. Time and Expense Tracking
Credenza keeps all the information related to a client file in one place (including your email of course since Credenza resides inside Outlook). You can easily bill for client-related activities because of the linked client files. Just convert any activity (e.g., an appointment) into a time entry with a click (you can manually add a time entry to any client file as well). Credenza tracks expenses just as easily as it tracks your billable time.

3. Billing and Payment
Many lawyers create bills in Word since there is no way to bill from Outlook. Credenza doesn’t just track all of the time and expenses for each of your clients, but also features a complete billing system. Credenza can create invoices, record payments, manage retainers and trust accounts, generate work in progress reports, and more. And with just a click you can send an invoice via email to your client because — you guessed it — Credenza resides within Outlook.

As noted above, Credenza has many other features. Take a look at the web site for more details. (www.credenzasoft.com). With Credenza, you don’t get practice management plus Outlook, you get practice management inside Outlook — just one place to go for everything you need.

Seth Rowland, Esq, was named TechnoLawyer Consultant of the Year in 2002 for his contributions in the fields of document assembly and law practice automation. He is a nationally known technologist whose company, Basha Systems LLC (www.bashasys.com), has helped many law firms build customized practice management and workflow solutions, including with Credenza. Please visit his blog (www.bashasys.info) for the latest on document assembly and practice management systems.