



BEST BUY



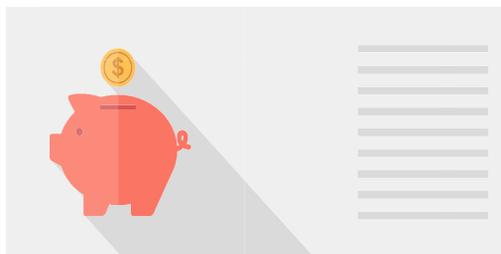
How to choose the right legal software for your practice.



BY NICOLE BLACK AND CRAIG GREENING



It's not easy to make the right technology decisions for your law firm. After all, you went to law school to be a lawyer, not an IT specialist. And these days, it's harder than ever to pick legal software because there are so many choices and so little time, especially for a solo practitioner.



The first step is to determine what type of software you need. Does your law firm require a robust law practice management system featuring contact management, calendaring, time tracking, invoicing, document management, and document assembly? Or perhaps you already have a good system in place and are seeking single-purpose software for billing, accounting, or data backup.

Next, you must decide whether to choose Web-based or premise-based software. A number of factors should be considered when making this decision. With premise-based software, your firm's data is stored on a computer or server typically located on-site. Access is limited to computers in your law office and is not dependent on an Internet connection. Often, most costs are paid upfront and you own and are responsible for maintaining your firm's servers and software.

Alternatively, Web-based software can be used wherever you happen to be, using an Internet-enabled device. It requires a low initial investment and provides a fast and cost-efficient deployment of the software. You don't have to maintain the software or servers, the provider continuously updates the product, and training and support are available.

Cost is another important factor when deciding between premise-based and Web-based software. When evaluating the total cost, be sure to take into consideration expenses for training, add-on modules, support, upgrade fees, and annual licensing fees.

The next step is to carefully research your options and choose software that fits into your law firm's work flow. Online research and word of mouth are often great places to start, so use search engines and read blogs, forums, and discussions on LinkedIn and other social media platforms.

To get started, here is a list of websites with ideas and recommendations:

- American Bar Association's SoloSez forum: americanbar.org/groups/gpsolo/resources/solosez.html
- Macs In Law Offices Google Group: groups.google.com/forum/#!forum/milogroup
- Attorney at Work: attorneyatwork.com
- ABA's Legal Technology Resource Center: americanbar.org/groups/departments_offices/legal_technology_resources.html

When researching your software options, make sure to consider additional savings, both in money and time, that the software offers with any integrated services that you may currently be paying for separately. These include

online payment services, website services, QuickBooks, Microsoft Outlook or Google Sync, and Dropbox compatibility, among others.

Next, compare pricing plans. Keep in mind that price is important, but—as the old adage goes—you get what you pay for. Also consider how easily your firm's existing data can be migrated into the new system. Will the software allow you to store and easily access digital documents from any location? Will it support the elimination of paper invoices and reduce the need to mail letters to clients by facilitating secure online communication? It's important that the product is reliable and that it will keep confidential client data safe. Ensure that the provider has a good track record and is financially stable, and understand your jurisdiction's ethical standards.

Being able to test drive the software is key because you will likely be spending a lot of time using the platform. Many legal software providers offer a no-strings-attached, 30-day free trial. Sign up and try it out. Ideally, the software should be intuitive and easy to use on your own. Have co-workers give it a run, too, and call the provider with any questions. Consider signing up for webinars or one-on-one training sessions, and assess how knowledgeable the provider's staff is about the product.

That brings us to customer service, which can make or break your legal software experience. If you encounter an issue, you want it resolved quickly and efficiently. Research the company's customer service hours and ensure that there are multiple assistance avenues available.

Once you've followed these steps, you'll be well on your way to making the right choice for your law firm. By investing just a bit of your time upfront to explore your options, you'll be able to focus more on representing your clients. **TBJ**



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