

Laserfiche ECM Blogs

The Prosecution Rests

Written by Melissa Henley

Criminal trials are notorious for the excessive amounts of paperwork they generate. But in Eaton County, MI, prosecuting attorneys are going to court with laptops instead of briefcases full of paper files—an advantage that has led to better communication, easier pretrial conferences and quicker case resolutions.

For prosecuting attorneys, cases revolve around overstuffed paper file folders, and the Eaton County prosecutor's office was spending a large amount of time shuffling paper. "We spent up to 50 percent of our time in the office working with the case file folder—and we weren't using the time, we were *wasting* it," says Jeffrey L. Sauter, the county's prosecuting attorney.

The process of digitizing paper files began in October 2003, when Dr. Robert Sobie, Eaton County's information services director, suggested that Sauter's office digitally archive closed files and scan active files. Sauter had one simple question: "Do you think you can eliminate all this paper?"

A resounding "yes" came in the form of a Laserfiche® digital document management solution. With a simple integration, case files scanned and stored in Laserfiche link to the Prosecuting Attorneys Association of Michigan's Adult Case Tracking System (ACTS) and Juvenile Case Tracking System (JCTS), the case management systems (CMS) used by 78 of the 83 prosecutors in Michigan. While that system was great for managing schedules, attorneys still relied on paper progress notes and case documents. Now, from within the CMS, attorneys or staff simply click a button to create case notes that are automatically filed in Laserfiche for easy retrieval.

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Jeffrey L. Sauter

Prosecuting Attorney, Eaton County

Reducing paper consumption was a big plus, but the biggest efficiency gains happened when the prosecutor's office began scanning in current files. In January 2004, they began transitioning between paper and electronic files, and a year later, the office stopped creating paper misdemeanor files entirely.

“We went slowly,” Sauter remembers, “but once we realized the sky hadn’t fallen, we stopped making paper felony files. These are more serious cases, and eliminating paper files entirely made some of our attorneys nervous. But within a month, we noticed how much more efficient we were.”

Eaton County structured their Laserfiche filing system around the criminal transaction number, which the CMS automatically generates. “We have ‘frequent fliers,’ habitual criminals with multiple case files, so it was no use to search by name,” Sauter says. Once the CMS creates the case file, the assigned attorney then reviews it, highlighting the authorization or denial of the charges in Laserfiche. Laserfiche’s sticky note annotation feature enables attorneys to provide detailed analysis and charging instructions directly on the documents.

The police department and defense attorneys have started submitting police reports, pre-trial motions and other documents electronically, eliminating scanning and shredding. “90 percent of our police reports are sent electronically, with photos and videos sent on disk,” Sauter says. “We use Snapshot™ to send them to our repository. Defense attorneys submit their documents to our department e-mail address, and we e-mail documents to them as well. The defense attorneys like it so much—because the court sends documents via US mail, they often have our discovery documents days before they even know they’ve been assigned the case.”

After implementing Laserfiche, the prosecutor’s office withdrew their request for an additional legal secretary, only one month after beginning to scan felony files. In addition, they saved more than \$10,000 in clerical staffing costs and decreased office supply usage by nearly 35 percent. “These additional savings are annual, not one-time savings,” Sauter comments. “In fact, I expect my supplies budget to decrease even more next year.”

While their Laserfiche system worked well, Sauter wanted to extend its benefits outside the prosecutor’s office. “The interface was great,” he said, “but our attorneys needed files in court. I talked to Dr. Sobie, and we switched our attorneys from desktop computers to laptops, and we also extended a county wireless network into courtrooms and conference rooms.”

With wireless access from the courtroom, attorneys who are in court can also e-mail their colleagues back in the office with questions pertaining to case law. “We get a lot of S.O.S. e-mails from the courtroom, of the ‘Help, the judge is about to rule against me’ type,” Sauter comments.

Eaton County uses Laserfiche to store audio of all 911 calls, so attorneys can access them instantly from within the CMS. Having evidence at the ready makes pretrial conferences faster and easier, because prosecutors can present their evidence, convincing defense attorneys and defendants of the wisdom of a plea bargain. “Honestly, it provides many quick resolutions to cases that likely would have gone to trial instead—which is a huge advantage for taxpayers,” Sauter says.

Laserfiche also makes managing electronic evidence and complying with e-discovery orders much easier. “We can instantly search documents to find information in witness statements, which makes it easier to impeach those witnesses on the stand,” Sauter says. “The text is right there, and with the ‘hit list’ showing bolded lines of context, it’s quick to find information, which we can save to use during the trial.”

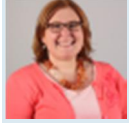
And that’s not to mention the benefit of having photographs and other evidence at the ready when the witness is on the stand. Sauter recalls using Laserfiche for the first time during a double murder trial. “Because it was the first big case without the paper file, I wanted to take it to set an example for the other prosecutors in the office,” he remembers.

With diagrams and crime scene photos stored in Laserfiche, Sauter explained the sequence of events to the jury. “This proved very effective,” he says. “I used the Laserfiche digital zoom feature to focus on specific areas of the crime scene photos. The jury found that very impressive.”

In the future, Eaton County plans to use Laserfiche Workflow 8™ to further automate case workflow. The new system will automatically notify attorneys of cases by e-mail, as well as automatically notify police when charges are filed.

Sauter and his team are so committed to educating prosecutors about the benefit of a paperless office that their Website provides an extensive review of their file management system, as well as training videos prepared by office staff. Sauter also speaks at industry conferences about Eaton County’s successes with Laserfiche.

“Paperless file management is not an ‘if,’ it’s a ‘when,’” Sauter says. “Our change has led to a revolutionary improvement in how we do the people’s business, and it’s a harbinger of the future for many other prosecutors’ offices.”



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