

Laserfiche ECM Blogs

Tipping the Scales of Justice

Written by Melissa Henley

Thinking of a traditional courthouse records room might conjure up images of file cabinets overflowing with folders, but that's not how it works in York County, PA, where staff have used technology to streamline the thousands of cases that pass through the court system each year.

The York County Clerk of Courts Office uses a Laserfiche® digital document management system to manage criminal court records for the York County Court of Common Pleas, whose records are used by 25 other county departments. With over 8,000 cases processed annually and more than \$9 million collected in costs, fines and restitution, managing the related documents is a big job.



Senior Project Administrator Mary Jane McCluskey.

Before implementing Laserfiche, York County faced what Information Services Department Senior Project Administrator Mary Jane McCluskey calls a “sneakernet’ nightmare,” with paper copies as the only reliable means of circulating information. Searching for documents which could be located on any one of sixteen clerks’ desks was becoming increasingly costly. Not to mention that older documents resided five miles offsite and communicating with the county prison—also located five miles away—relied on easily-misplaced faxes.

“With the prison, people were often quicker than the process,” McCluskey says. “New inmates would be turned away because their paperwork hadn’t arrived and the prison didn’t expect them. Or the family would arrive to pick up a released inmate, and the prison wouldn’t know the case disposition, so they wouldn’t be able to do anything.”

After a successful pilot project to digitize minutes from board meetings, York County began digitizing court files in 2005. The first step was to identify major categories or topics of filings, such as “motion–petition–order” or “disposition–sentencing,” which streamlined file organization in Laserfiche. “My staff put their institutional knowledge to work and developed 17 criteria, or file chapters, from the myriad filings we receive daily,” says Clerk of Courts Don O’Shell. “Wendy Bossard, our judicial services manager, and Kathy Groff, our records unit manager, deserve tremendous credit for developing the basic building blocks of our electronic file structure in Laserfiche.”

In 2006, the office began scanning all incoming filings, with the goal of imaging all filings within four hours, or by the next business day for documents received after 3:00 P.M. Staff established a rush process, whereby documents requiring more rapid processing are rushed directly to imaging, docketed and forwarded to a judge, serviced to the sheriff or district attorney, or sent along to defense counsel.

On the recommendation of their reseller, DocuScan USA, the county also set up a system to simplify scanning and filing. They implemented Quick Fields™ with Pattern Matching and Real Time Lookup™, which pulls the case number from the state database and creates a folder structure. Quick Fields also automatically sorts and files case documents, which minimizes staff training. “All we have to do is create batch header sheets with bar codes, and Quick Fields does the rest,” says Front Counter Supervisor Garth Bambling. “It takes seconds for front counter clerks to create batch header sheets, which are attached to the documents and then sent back for scanning.”

County-wide access to the Laserfiche repository means that other departments can view scanned documents as they need them, eliminating the need to copy documents multiple times and significantly reducing file requests—making the court and related departments much more efficient. This reduces the need for overtime and promotes better relations among departments, given that staff in other parts of county government can instantly access case files maintained in the clerk’s office. The prison records office also has access to case dispositions and court documents in a searchable format, which eliminates the problem of misplaced documents, as well as the need to physically fax or transport paper records.

The office’s Laserfiche repository stores everything from criminal and juvenile records to miscellaneous docket files, summary appeals and administration files. By early 2006, all files had been imaged from the front end, and, in summer 2006, staff began the back-scanning process. “We had four million documents from 2000 on alone,” McCluskey says, “and we needed to be able to give the judges, probation staff, district attorneys and public defenders access to those documents.”

But not everyone immediately saw value in digitizing case files. “Certain members of the court expressed their preference that imaging take a back seat to the docketing and servicing of court filings, and said that imaging should be accomplished on the back end, instead of on the front end,” O’Shell remembers. “Some even went as far as to cite potential contempt of court proceedings if imaging wasn’t relegated to solely an archival process.”

Yet once the 2006 and 2007 files were digitized, judges began asking for even more documents online. “They found that it made research easy,” McCluskey says, “and they liked being able to immediately respond to questions from attorneys, probation officers and the public.”

To help judges and staff further embrace the new system, McCluskey and her colleagues started a hands-on training program to train staff during the judges’ lunch hour. “This is an ongoing project,” McCluskey says. “We’re training other departments as well. When we first implemented the system, we gave users access to it before we’d trained them, and some users became slightly frustrated because they didn’t realize everything the system could do. We definitely learned from that.”

The Snyder’s of Hanover bakery tour is a favorite in the “Factory Tour Capital of the World.”

And that wasn’t the only thing McCluskey learned. “With a big project like this, it’s important to think in terms of years, not months,” she says. “Just realize that success builds upon success—just focus on getting one thing accomplished, then move on to the next thing. Work in small steps, and before you know it, you’re done.”

The York County program doesn’t just provide faster access to case files, it also helps to ensure business continuity. McCluskey chairs an initiative to develop a countywide continuity of operations plan, of which Laserfiche is a key component. “This is a three-year project that moves far beyond disaster recovery,” she says. “We focus not just on technology, but also people, process and location to identify vulnerability. With departments that only have paper files, like our public defender or our mental health department, what happens if they can’t get back into their building for months? What happens if the files are gone entirely?”

In fall 2007, York County implemented a pilot program to give attorneys access to case files over the Web, and hopes to extend the system even further. The county also plans to implement Laserfiche in both the central booking division of the sheriff’s department and in the children and youth services department, where cases are often

open for more than 20 years. The benefits have been so great that the clerk's office would like to receive superior and supreme court appeals electronically, and they'd like to install touch screens in the courtroom so clerks can enter information and send it to Laserfiche even more quickly.

The progress the county courts have made is impressive. "To us, the biggest change is that the judges who refused to give up paper—the same ones who were threatening us with contempt of court charges if we couldn't give them immediate access to case files—are now the system's biggest advocates," O'Shell says. "We even had one judge tell us the system was 'better than sliced bread.' "



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