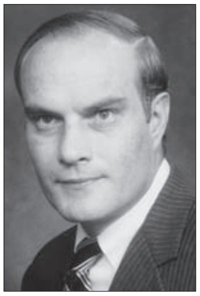

# Technology Corner

**By Joseph G. Hodges, Jr.**

## Case Management Software for Solo Practitioners and Small Firms

In order to properly and efficiently manage a professional estate planning and administration practice in today's technological environment, most of us can no longer get by with relying on stand-alone systems, such as contact managers or time and billing systems. While contact management programs such as Microsoft's Outlook, ACT or GoldMine have many useful features, and while their are some excellent stand-alone time-keeping and billing programs solo practitioners and small firms can use, such as Timeslips and TABS III, each of these functioning alone and independently of the others lacks the sort of total software program and data integration that is so essential to enabling us to practice efficiently and as an integrated group of service providers. What is needed is a single software program that can seamlessly integrate and coordinate on a real-time basis the ongoing management of such things as individual and group calendars, client matters and projects, client relations and conflicts, time billing and expense tracking and control, document tracking and automation, and all modes of communication, including by phone, fax and e-mail.

This is where a good case management software program can be invaluable. In the solo and small firm sector, there are a multitude of programs that claim to be good case management systems. However, many of them are nothing more than simple database tools or templates that come with some fields of information that have been customized for a particular professional practice without a whole lot of thought having been given to the usefulness or completeness of that information. While some of these programs may be perfectly suitable for some users, most of us need to use something that is a lot more robust, has many more features and is being developed and supported by a vendor who has been around a long time, has a good track record and is financially sound enough to support and improve the vendor's case management product. Recent surveys conducted by such organizations as the Legal Technology Resource Center of the American Bar Association have revealed that only a few popular case management software programs are currently in use by a majority of the solo and small firm market, particularly in the legal field. Those products in alphabetical order are **Abacus Law** by Abacus Data Systems, Inc. *(www.abacuslaw.com)*, **Amicus Attorney** by Gavel and Gown Software, Inc. *(www.amicus.com)*; **Practice Master** by Software Technology, Inc. *(www.stilegal.com)*, **ProLaw** by Thompson-West Publishing *(www.prolaw.com)* and **Time Matters** by Datatxt Corp. *(www.timematters.com)*.

There are a number of key features that all these programs have in common that have, over time, become more or less minimally acceptable features by which all quality case management programs can and should be evaluated. Admittedly, each of these programs handles these features in different ways and with varying degrees of completeness. In addition, each user of such a program will find different features that are of particular usefulness to that user but that might not be well suited for others, depending on the nature and structure of the user's professional practice. Below is a listing of some of these features and some of the things to look for when the usefulness of one of these programs is being evaluated.

### *What Editions Are Available*

The user needs to determine how many different editions of a single version of the program are available, as most of these programs come in more than one edition, with each edition varying by the number of features that come with the program and the database functionality that is needed in order to run them. The focus for the solo or small firm should normally

*Joseph G. Hodges, Jr. is an attorney in Denver, Colorado and serves as Co-Chair of the ABA's Real Property, Probate and Trust Law Section Technology Committee.*

be on the simpler and less expensive editions unless there are particular features of some of the more complex and expensive editions that are deemed to be essential to the user. This way the user will not end up with an edition that is too complex or advanced for his particular needs and available computer equipment or that has features in it that he will never need or use. Attention should also be paid to whether or not the version currently being sold is the most current version and what prior versions are compatible with it, especially if the user is already using an earlier version of that program.

### *Calendar Functions*

This is one of the more critical features of a good case management system. One component to consider is the method that is used to render the various calendars that are available, as some programs do this in a graphical view and others by a list of events. Also consider also how many different views of those are available, such as daily, weekly, monthly or a selected sequence of dates. Also determine if and how the various calendar views provide access to various to-do task lists and appointment schedules, particularly in the daily and weekly calendar views. Also consider how customizable the various calendar views are by the user and whether those special views can be saved for later reuse. Another feature to look at is how easy it is to schedule events and tasks and then to move them between the various calendars and task lists, as a lot of these programs allow the user to do this in a simple drag-and-drop fashion. If the program produces a list of events, also consider the various ways in which those events can be sorted (by date, client, time, *etc.*) and the variety of ways in which search queries of that data can be developed and are handled. Also determine how events or tasks with no specific due dates are handled.

A key component of the calendar functions is whether the program comes with a feature that can automatically launch various other functions. These functions can include starting a telephone call, launching an e-mail or Web browser program, opening a client record, opening saved files or documents that are associated with a particular client or case matter or even launching a document assembly program.

Another important component of the calendar functions is how well the program integrates with either Novell's GroupWise or Microsoft's Outlook, especially if such integration is needed in order for the case management program to fully function. Related to this is how well the program links to various personal data assistants (PDAs), including the popular Palm Pilot PDA, and whether that linkage is only one-way (just to the PDA) or two-way (between the case management program and the PDA), as the latter capability will be needed in order for the user to be able to update the master calendar for new data that has been entered in the PDA.

Still another critical component of the calendar functionality is the way in which it handles group scheduling and whether this feature is available in all editions of the program. Some programs default to showing the events only for the current logged-in user but have drop-down menu options for adding other users or defined groups. Others default to showing all users in a selected group of individuals. Regardless of which method is used, the ability to coordinate the calendars of multiple individuals working on the same matters or project is essential where that sort of an office structure exists.

### *Reminders and Alerts*

All of these programs come with a variety of ways in which they can notify the user of events and matters that may require attention on any given day or at any specific time of day. Some of them do this by use of a daily alert or report screen that appears when the program is first accessed each day. Others rely on a category breakdown of the daily calendar screen for this particular task. The user needs to determine how customizable these features are and what sort of events can be included in the alerts, such as daily appointments, overdue tasks, unread phone and e-mail messages, incomplete or unposted time entries, missing file information and incomplete tasks. The user also needs to determine the extent to which the task lists of other users in a selected group can be viewed. Another important feature is how many reminders can be given for any single event and how often, as well as whether there is an alarm function that can be associated with that feature. Also important is the extent to which rule-based events, such as statutory deadlines based on a filing date, can be automatically calendared for such reminders. Still another useful feature is whether multiple functions can be triggered off of the same event, such as contact letters and e-mails.

### *Collecting Client Information*

All of these programs use a fairly standard way of collecting the required client file information. This typically consists of using a combination of one or more pre-defined standard screens and fields of information coupled with a variety of user-definable screens and fields of information. One feature to look for is the degree to which the user can add to, rename and resize existing fields of information to coordinate with the types of clients and matters he typically handles. Another feature to consider is what sorts of data can be included in custom fields, such as text, numbers and dates. Still another is the extent to which the data entered in these customized fields can be used in the assembly of documents for the client or for launching various other software tasks. Also important is the extent to which customized screens can be developed for use only in certain kinds of client matters.

### *Facilitating Document Assembly*

Perhaps the feature of most current interest is the degree to which the data in the case management system can be integrated with various document assembly products to produce documents for a client so that the required data must only be entered once, thereby lessening the chances for using erroneous or inconsistent data. All of these programs will interact with Microsoft Word, Corel WordPerfect and Capsoft HotDocs, although each of them varies in their approach to this. Some of these will interact with additional document assembly programs, such as ProDoc, GhostFill and WealthCounsel. It is important to determine which versions of the document assembly programs are compatible with the particular case management program that is being contemplated and which editions of each case management program offer this feature. One particular feature that is handy to have is the ability to alert the user to fill in fields that are missing information as the assembly process is under way so that the missing data can be entered into each program at the same time. Still another handy feature is the ability to create a client intake form that, when properly filled out, will automatically populate all of the required fields in the database, especially if this intake form can be made available to clients *via* the Web so they can complete the same at home and on their own time schedules.

### *Document Management*

Each of these programs comes with some sort of an internal document management function built in that allows for the tracking and retrieval of specific documents that have been produced for and linked to a given client file. In addition, most of them have editions that will integrate with the Worlddox document management program, and some of them will also integrate with other such programs like PC Docs and iManage. Something to consider is how complete the integration is so that each program can share information with the other, thus avoiding the need to individually link the document to the case manager. Another handy feature is the ability of the case manager to directly link to scanned documents if such technology is being used.

### *E-Mail Management*

One handy feature to look for is the ability to automatically link e-mails to individual client data files. Another is the ability to launch the user's e-mail client from various functions in the case management program, such as an events reminder tool. Still another is which particular e-mail programs are compatible with a given case management program, as ideally the program should be able to handle any MAPI-compliant (mail application program interface) e-mail.

### *Integration with Time Keeping and Billing*

One important feature of a good case management program is its ability to track time and link bi-directionally with the user's time-keeping and billing system. This allows time entries to be captured in the case management program and posted to the billing program. All of these programs link with Timeslips, and some of them also link with PCLaw and TABS III.

### *Some Additional Features to Consider*

One additional feature to consider is the degree to which the user can customize the program and how easy it is to do this, as some programs allow for quite a bit of customization. Another is how secure the program is in terms of who can or should have access to what types of data. Another is the compatibility of the various editions of the product with the user's existing hardware and operating system. Also a consideration is the types of customer support that are offered and what each costs, as well as whether certified consultants for the same are located in the user's area.

### *How to Determine Which System Is Best*

There is no easy answer to this, as it is more a question of which system best meets the particular needs of the individual user. Thus, the user needs to decide what sort of functionality is needed for his practice. In addition, input from other users and product reviews are worth exploring. Also, all of these programs have Web sites and offer free demos of their products on those sites. It must also be remembered that the ultimate program choice may dictate that certain changes have to be made in the way the user has been handling such tasks in the past.

This Issue's Featured Web Sites:

- Compare Loan Rates—***www.bankrate.com***
- Kelley Blue Book Car Values—***www.kbb.com***
- U.S. Government Information Portal—***www.firstgov.com***
- Translate Almost Any Text—***www.world.altavista.com***