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TOP
10

ways technology can help lawyers in small legal departments save time and reduce risk

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In the world of legal departments, it's the lawyers in small legal departments ("SLDs") that face the biggest challenges. Often, they are more resource-restrained and stretched, having to wear many different hats, such as processing documents and invoices, running reports in addition to performing their full time role as a legal professional. SLD lawyers' fragmented focus, coupled with the necessity of dealing with unfamiliar legal issues, can lead to an increased danger of something important slipping through the net. Technology can help mitigate this risk by automating alerts for vital tasks so they don't "slip" through, as well as automating routine tasks so there is more time to focus on the important matters at hand. This Top Ten reviews ten ways SLD lawyers can use technology to better manage their work.

1. AUTOMATE UPDATES FROM YOUR LAW FIRMS

Ever wonder what's actually happening with a matter? You wouldn't be the first. With matter management software, you can require that your law firms send updates on a regular and timely basis or they won't be able to submit their invoices. This gets law firms' attention quickly. Past updates can easily be reviewed without searching through emails since they're all stored within the legal department management system to which your external law firm also has access. Furthermore, if there's a truly material development, you'll get an alert in the system to let you know there is an important issue in the matter.

2. AUTOMATE ENFORCEMENT OF EXPENSE GUIDELINES

You've set up expense guidelines and sent them out to your firms. Now in an ideal world they will carefully read the guidelines and comply. Unfortunately, this is rarely the case, and what often happens is that there is no time to review invoices in detail, so outside of grievous violations that jump off the page, most expense guidelines violations slip through. This is one of those onerous daily tasks that can easily be automated using software. All you would need to do is input expense guidelines into the software and it will flag violations for you, which can then be reduced to be within the guidelines.

3. AUTOMATE ACCRUALS COLLECTION AND REPORTS

A legal department is often required to present accrual numbers to the finance department. Accruals usually include invoices currently being approved, plus billable time that the law firm has recorded that has yet to be invoiced to the company. One item is in the legal department's control (unapproved invoices) the other is not (billable time not yet invoiced), which means this information must be extracted from the law firms in a timely fashion. Calling and emailing firms to get an accrual number to enter into an Excel spreadsheet is a laborious and time-consuming task especially in a SLD. Accrual features in legal matter management solutions can ensure the law firms enter this information in the system by not allowing them to submit invoices until they have. Furthermore, all of the invoices being approved are also in the system, so to get the current accrual number is as simple as pushing a button to run a report.

4. AUTOMATE REVIEWING OF BILLS

SLD lawyers have to process a lot of bills, namely invoices (copies, filing, approval routing, delivery to the A/P department, etc.) along with reviewing them. But what usually happens is that these tasks often take a backseat due to pressing legal work. Lawyers can automate this process by using matter management and e-billing software that automatically alerts you when a law firm posts a new invoice, routes the invoice for approval, and then sends the approved invoices to the A/P department. If external law firm hours need to be reduced, it is possible to dispute the invoice through the system. The law firm will be sent an alert with an outline of the issues raised. You can then make a valid argument that will be recorded within the system.

5. AUTOMATE LEGAL HOLDS

Managing legal holds in a way that is defensible in court, even if the organisation is relatively small, is a cumbersome and not error-proof process if done manually. It's much easier to use an automated programme that will notify record custodians of the hold, send follow-up reminders, and require a confirmation of receipt from the custodian. This type of software will also log all related audit trail information related to the legal hold notification process. Doing this manually could waste a lot of time and is simply a bad legal practice. If your company gets legal holds regularly, mitigate your risk, save your time – get software to handle the process for you.

6. AUTOMATE NECESSARY REPORTS

The CFO, CEO, or Board of Directors often require reports from the legal department, such as spending reports, litigation exposure, liability estimates, spend trending, area of law work allocation, etc. Gleaning this information through invoices received throughout the year, putting it in a spreadsheet, and manipulating that spreadsheet to present the data can be an ongoing project. If all the spending is in one system, the data is already there. A report needs only to be created once and saved to be run again in the future. The legal department can also create reports that show the value of the legal department's efforts (for example, ROI reports, invoice reduction reports, and decrease in exposure over time), rather than just showing how much it has spent.

7. MANAGE IP WORK

Think fast-growing tech start-up company. The company's big enough to need to hire a couple of lawyers, but for a company this size, its legal portfolio leans heavily toward IP matters. This type of software allows SLDs to receive automatic notices for trademark registrations due, implement structured processes for patent maintenance, and comply with IP developments to make payments on time. A legal department management system can provide end-to-end management of your intellectual assets, from R&D to filings, prosecution, grants, conflicts, and licensing. It will also allow you to file application and citation more easily with pre-populated forms.

8. MAKE THE CASE FOR A NEW HIRE

Once all of the legal department's spending is in one place, reports on matter type can be run. This allows a legal department to show a couple of important items. Firstly, senior management will be able to see the workload of the department over time. Assuming the work continues to increase, this is a powerful argument for more headcount. Secondly, this type of report allows in-house counsel to show, for example, that they spent £150,000 on contract work or property work. If the fully-loaded cost of hiring a new lawyer is £100,000, then the legal department would be saving the company £50,000 by hiring a new lawyer. This is a much better argument than simply saying you're overworked.

9. CONTRACT AND DOCUMENT MANAGEMENT

We have all had the experience of rifling through vast metal cabinets looking for a contract or addendum. In-house lawyers get a lot of requests to see contracts and contract provisions within the legal department and from business units, so looking for these contracts can add up to a lot of time. A document and contract management system will have search capabilities across all of your company's documents so they can be found quickly. This type of system should also have alerts for contracts so that expiration, renewal and/or cancellation dates are not missed.

10. RESEARCH/FORM LIBRARY

This virtual library may be a part of a document management system, but this would be a custom section created by your department. If a company is in a heavily regulated industry and has a lot of contract work, it will save a lot of time to have best practice contract forms updated with the most current regulations on file so you don't need to reinvent the wheel every time.Additionally, keeping research memos, whether done internally or by your law firms, in a research library so that you can search for this easily if and when the same question comes up again a year from now, will save your department both time and money.

CONCLUSION

Being in a SLD means that you have got to be agile, efficient, and able to track potentially dozens of legal issues at any given time. Help your legal department do a better job by using technology that saves time and keeps the important items on your radar.

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