

## Selecting the right practice management system can save firms years of despair

Independent management consulting firm Harriss Wagner says sound planning ensures a brighter future for law firms

It is not easy to select the right legal practice management system in the market today, not without a thorough examination of the system's value to business imperatives and future direction. Amanda Harriss, founding partner at Harriss Wagner, an independent management consulting firm specialising in legal practice management services, says it is important to select a system that is right for the particular needs of the practice. "While many law firms may be considered the same and offer similar services, they often are dissimilar in important factors such as quality, values and business approach. Selecting a new practice management system therefore should not be based on what another law firm has implemented," she says.

Any investment made in a new practice management system (or related system) that is expected to support the firm's operations for the next eight to 10 years needs to present tangible benefits to the shareholders, to the firm's clients and to the operations of the business. Too often systems are purchased and implemented with a full suite of software modules, some meeting the needs of the firm, some meeting partial needs, while others meet none at all. Such choices become not only an unnecessary capital expense to

the firm, but for many years after, needless software maintenance costs continue to be paid on superfluous software.

What can be even more concerning is that initial implementation costs are considered the primary focus for some firms when selecting a new system, devoting little time and effort to analysing the long-term costs associated with the wrong choice or outcome. Harriss believes that firms in the market for a new practice management system today should take a rigorous approach to system selection and consider important factors that meet the needs of the firm's foundation, external demands, and future operations. While these considerations may impact initial implementation costs, the likely outcomes are long-term cost savings, competitive advantage, and future opportunities.

Harriss cites a reputable Sydney-based law firm that recognised the need to upgrade its practice management, document management, marketing and e-mail systems, as well as introducing an integrated human resource system. The firm immediately understood the benefits that would be gained from the upgrade in technology. However, it also believed that obtaining a thorough understanding of available system options and implementation factors were key to

avoiding unnecessary long-term costs to the firm and loss of productivity. This is where independent advice can often be invaluable for firms not familiar with the complexities involved in selecting the best system to ensure long-term benefits. Harriss concludes: "Being aware of the 'additional' costs that may otherwise not be considered until after a system has been purchased, can prevent a firm's attention from being diverted from the benefits of the investment."



Amanda Harriss