Best of Breed Versus All-in-One

By Phil Homburger

As the legal field becomes more technology-driven, and as changes to technology happen at what seems like lightning speed, making the correct decisions about what systems to implement, when to upgrade them and how they all work together are imperative for a firm's success.

Throughout the years, the software industry for the legal field has evolved into two distinct camps: all-in-one and best-of-breed. All-in-one systems provide both front- and back-office functionality, including time and billing, accounting, case management and document management. Best-of-breed systems focus on a specific area or areas, providing more options for configuration as well as greater emphasis on functionality. Many all-in-one systems resulted from the rash of mergers and acquisitions that have occurred among legal software companies.

While an all-in-one software system provides both front- and back-office capability, it may lack the depth of functionality needed. If a firm is just starting out or has a limited focus in specific needs, then an all-in-one may be absolutely perfect. Then, theoretically, the firm only has to negotiate with only one vendor and one point of contact for any support issues.

If a firm is looking to find a solution for more than one practice area, or has complex needs for storing and retrieving information — or, more importantly, if a firm already has entrenched applications — then a best-of-breed solution may provide a higher degree of functionality. Most best-of-breed systems in the marketplace have the ability to integrate with various other applications that a law firm may be using. This integration makes it appear as if the firm is using an all-in-one system. However, the firm benefits by not disrupting the well-known system that's in place while it brings in the added functionality of the new program.

Another difference between the types of systems is the level of configuration. Best-of-breed frequently allows for an à la carte approach to software selection — a firm chooses which modules best suit its needs and then configures those packages, as opposed to taking a one-size-fits-all approach. The word "configure" may imply a more complicated implementation, but it also allows a more process-oriented approach and will most likely increase acceptance among users. If a firm is looking for a solution for multiple practice areas, or for more specialized types of law, best-of-breed solutions may provide a tighter fit and allow better adaptation to unique process flows.

As the trend accelerates toward solutions available via the cloud, there are additional considerations. Currently, many cloud-based systems are the all-in-one variety. While they are evolving rapidly, they

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are still generally a newer entrant in the legal software marketplace and, as such, may not have all the features that a firm requires. However, traditional vendors are now offering their products with an option to host them in the cloud as well. Many firms appear to be opting for a private or hybrid cloud approach. The obvious benefit is to avoid the potential for data breaches, as have occurred recently with companies such as Target and Home Depot. If the firm's data is not in the public cloud, it is far more difficult for someone to attack it.

No two firms are exactly alike. As such, a firm should make a software decision only after a critical assessment of its unique needs, taking into consideration the demonstrations of various products and paying attention to the details of the software product's functionality

Philip Homburger is the President and Chief Executive Officer of Synaptec Software and has been involved with LawBase since its inception in 1981.