

THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-SERVICE ACCESS TO INFORMATION


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In today's fast-paced, electronic world, it's more important than ever for organizations to make it easy for clients to access important information. For example, a law firm might find it beneficial for clients to have access to a Web portal that has up-to-date information about their cases.

Some forward-thinking firms have provided online tools that allow their clients to go far beyond providing answers to frequently asked questions. One Am Law 200 firm based in San Francisco allows their clients to enter matter details, provide follow-up information and, ultimately, track a matter's progress and status.

A legal department within a corporation could find it useful to have frequently requested items stored and available in an online application so they can reduce the number of requests into the department. It is becoming more common for a legal department to have standard contracts and agreements available for the various divisions within the company. As a new agreement is requested, it can be automatically drafted, forwarded to an attorney for review and finally sent on to the requester. As a failsafe, reminders can be created for appropriate follow up. All of this is intended to put the power in the legal department's (*i.e.*, the client's) hands. This reduces overhead and dramatically increases the amount of production.

Government agencies can benefit to the same degree as any other organization. One Court of Tax Appeals handles protests from citizens regarding their property tax assessments. Each year thousands of protests are received, resulting in the potential nightmare to schedule hearings for each protest. The agency has adopted a public-facing website to provide each appellant with the current status of their claim, any missing information, scheduling information and, eventually, results of the hearing process.

There are a few methods of providing self-service access. The two most popular are to build something internally using Microsoft SharePoint. This tool, while relatively inexpensive, provides a basic tool set to create your own portal to share information. A few of the disadvantages are that it has a steep learning curve and it can be difficult to connect to the various sources of information needed. An alternative is to use a commercial product designed for the legal industry. These applications come ready to allow for collaboration and self-service access to data and include integrations to many popular systems such as document management, case management and accounting. Either way, self-service is the wave of the future for client access to information. 



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