

Professional Responsibility in Electronic Practice Management

With over 20 faculty and 140 students each semester, the Clinical Law Program docket on any given day is of a scope and scale of many mid to large-size law firms. Just as information management systems have helped make those practices more collaborative, effective and efficient, new electronic practice management systems in the School of Law can improve client service and enhance student education.

Over the last year, the Clinical Law Program worked to implement an electronic practice management system. Led by Managing Director, Teresa LaMaster, a team of information technology professionals, lawyers, and administrators selected, customized and implemented TimeMatters® for the Clinical Program. School of Law alum and technology consultant Robert McNeil of the McNeil Group in Baltimore donated more than 150 hours of professional time to work on the project. With his help, the Law School was able to roll out the application this summer and fall to well over 100 students in 20 different clinical programs.

The project began with faculty interviews as part of an overall administrative needs assessment of the Clinical Program in the fall of 2004. Understanding the nature and scope of each faculty member's practice as part of this complex "firm" was critical to customizing the software to best serve student learning. A clear "wish list" of functionality began to emerge through the interviews including the need for better document management, easier ways to share and build upon knowledge, and methods to help maintain continuity between and after semesters all appeared at the top of the list. At the same time, key concerns regarding the shift to a more digital practice—security and confidentiality being chief

among them—were identified. Over the winter, several leading products were considered. TimeMatters® was selected for its robustness and ability to handle a complex practice with nearly 150 users each semester.

Implementing new technology provides not simply the opportunity to automate existing practices. Rather, new technology is a catalyst for reconsidering existing practices, looking for new ways of working and new ways of linking people and information. In an educational context like the School of Law, new technology provides an opportunity for hard thinking about just what it is about a practice that we think students need to understand or experience. For example, in electronic practice management, the easy transmission (and mis-transmission) of documents, and remote access to client information makes the breach of client confidences easier. The implementation of technology presses us to look for new tools and strategies to teach the importance of confidentiality to the attorney client relationship.

The implementation of electronic practice management led to new "hardware best practices" as well. Clinic documents are stored and backed-up on a secure server separate from the rest of the School of Law



Teresa LaMaster, Baorong Feng and Robert McNeil discuss TimeMatters® training.

documents and databases. Students receive separate email accounts only for client communications that are backed up and stored distinctly as well. Students receive training that the use of courseware to send or receive confidential client communications is prohibited.

Digital communication and information is revolutionizing law and law practice. For legal educators, that revolution creates a host of teaching moments as students encounter first hand, its impact on their professional responsibility.

Teresa K. LaMaster, JD, is Managing Director of the Clinical Law Program. Ms. LaMaster is responsible for overall practice management of the Program. She teaches in cyberlaw and technology issues in law practice.