

Benefits of a Modern Court Case Management System

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WHITE PAPER

A well-designed CMS will deliver core functionality that provides meaningful ancillary benefits to the courts, such as more efficient data entry, more effective data retrieval, better tools, and enhanced bar and public access.



There are a number of trends and issues affecting courts that create an impetus for greater use of available technology. As legal practice has become more technologically advanced, pressure mounts on the courts to join the flow of technological progress. One aspect of this impetus for technological growth is increased interest in implementation of e-filing and/or a more or less paperless court process, spurred in part by adoption of e-filing in the federal district courts. In addition, emphasis on government transparency, coupled with the focus of courts on building public trust and confidence in judicial institutions, have created greater demand for access to court information. Even absent other factors motivating change, a court's existing systems may simply be outdated, or even obsolete, from the perspective of functionality and continuing sustainability. Finally, and perhaps most pervasively, limited budgets require more efficient use of static, or even shrinking, resources.

HOW A MODERN CMS CAN HELP COURT SYSTEMS

A modern computerized case management system (CMS) can help courts address these issues. For example, allowing electronic access to the court's docket to counsel and the public through the CMS provides observable proof of the court's technological progress. In addition, a modern case management system provides the foundation for an e-filing system and can assist the court in meeting current demands for information by making access to case and court data more effective and efficient.

A CMS can provide for more effective use of resources for data input and retrieval, as well as in system deployment and maintenance. Finally, hard-dollar savings can be achieved using case management system functionality, such as electronic notification.

But tight budgets and limited resources so common in government today require that courts carefully assess whether those limited funds and resources should be devoted to acquisition of a new case management system. In making that assessment, it is important to recognize the range of benefits that a modern case management system can provide to the courts. Of course, those benefits include providing the direct functions of case management – that is, a computerized system for case initiation, docketing case progress, calendaring, document generation, and report generation. Less apparent, yet equally important, is that a well-designed modern case management system will deliver that core functionality in a manner that provides meaningful ancillary benefits to the courts, such as more efficient data entry, more effective data retrieval, fewer data errors, better case management tools, enhanced bar and public access to case information, and others. The purpose of this paper is to highlight some of those benefits as they have accrued to the Minnesota appellate courts in the more than a decade since implementation of a new case management system in March 2003.

MINNESOTA CMS PROCESS

Minnesota was an “early adopter” of computerized court case management, implementing its homegrown Trial Court Information System (TCIS) for the district courts in the early 1980s. An extension of TCIS for the appellate courts was added several years later. By 2000, although TCIS was still functioning, its technology had become outmoded, and the system was increasingly difficult to maintain. The Minnesota judicial branch was therefore pursuing acquisition of a replacement for TCIS – envisioned as a statewide court case management system that would also interface with other justice system partners, such as law enforcement and local prosecutors’ offices – to be known as MnCIS.

From the perspective of appellate users, the appellate version of TCIS always had functional limitations inherent in its origins as a district court case management system. To avoid a similar outcome with MnCIS, appellate court staff requested that the appellate courts be included in planning for the new system from the beginning, rather than having appellate court needs addressed after the system had been designed for the district courts.

When the MnCIS project encountered a roadblock in terms of lack of adequate available technology, the appellate representatives suggested the possibility of acquiring and implementing a separate appellate case management system on a more expedited basis, while the much larger and more complex district court project worked through its difficulties. We received permission to explore such a project, and in March 2003, the appellate courts went live with the core system of clerk’s office functionality (case initiation and docketing) in our new appellate court case management system – which we nicknamed MACS. Court-specific functionality that was included in the original contract, including separate customized calendaring and opinion processing functions for the Court of Appeals and the Supreme Court, as well as an extensive set of canned reports, came in a second deployment in early 2004. MACS continues to function well and effectively, more than a decade after its initial launch.

Additional functionality has been added to MACS over the years, some as ongoing enhancements provided for in the initial contract and some more substantial additions when funding became available. Two of the more significant additions were the public version – dubbed P-MACS – that went live in April 2007, and e-notification in June 2011.

Essential Characteristics of a Successful Court Case Management System

Adaptable. *Different courts approach the same core work in different ways or using different labels, courts change their internal processes and procedural rules over time, and cases inevitably arise that necessitate deviation from established processes. A modern court case management system should be able to easily adapt to your courts’ needs to provide a system that is user-friendly and sustainable.*

BENEFITS OF CMS

As noted above, beyond the direct benefits of the case processing functionalities provided by the case management system, MACS has provided significant ancillary benefits. Several of these benefits are described below.¹

1. Shorter Learning Curve

A well-designed CMS can provide a much shorter learning curve for users to master their assigned tasks. An intuitive interface helps users learn and remember the steps needed to complete a particular docketing process. Dropdown menus of the options for input relevant to the specific data field eliminate the need to memorize or constantly look up codes for data items. Pop-up alerts and readily accessible online help provide guidance for the new user and for infrequently used entries encountered by experienced users.

The shorter learning curve means that new employees can reach full productivity sooner and with less of their (and their manager’s) time devoted to training instead of production. Similarly, these features make it easier for users to provide backup for specialized work normally performed by a colleague who may be absent. Less frustration learning and operating the system can increase job satisfaction and in turn reduce staff turnover. Finally, these features contribute to fewer incorrect data entries and more consistent data entry across users and over time. This means less time devoted to analyzing and correcting erroneous docket entries and more reliable reporting data.

¹ This is not intended to be a comprehensive discussion of all the benefits provided by MACS. Many functional benefits are not included here. Moreover, benefits in the technical operation of the system that today’s technology provides, such as ease of deployment and maintenance in a browser-based system, are not addressed.

In Minnesota, our new system contrasted distinctly with the legacy system, in which most docketing entries consisted of a series of three-letter codes – e.g., for case type, party type, document filed, or the event that had occurred – that had to be memorized (or looked up in a thick three-ring binder). After MACS was implemented, new employees, and the occasional temp fill-in, routinely commented on how easy it was to learn how to perform their tasks on the case management system.

2. Integration with Related Systems

A court case management system can integrate with related computerized systems to retrieve relevant data and incorporate that data into the CMS. This integration provides the obvious benefit of reducing data input time for the users. Moreover, by bringing the data directly from the source data systems, data input errors can be minimized, and this maximizes the value received from those systems as well.

For example, MACS is integrated with the district court case management system (provided by a different vendor), enabling the appellate case management system to “harvest” case initiation data about a new appeal from the district court system. This data harvest provides the identity of the lower court, as well as the case title, case number, parties, and attorneys from the district court. Within MACS, the appellate user then merely verifies and edits this information as appropriate for the appeal, streamlining the case initiation process.

MACS is also integrated with the state attorney registration database. The address, attorney registration number, and license status for each attorney is provided to MACS directly from the attorney registration system. This reduces data input when an attorney is added to a case.

In addition, MACS is integrated with the database of judge information maintained by state court administration. Thus, the tables from which MACS users enter the identity of district court or appellate judges related to an appeal are populated from the court administration database, eliminating the need for separate maintenance of the same information in MACS.

As noted, because MACS is able to harvest data from these integrated systems, the amount of data that must be keyed into MACS is reduced, both saving staff time and reducing the opportunity for data entry error. Moreover, harvesting the data maximizes the value received from the integrated systems as well.

3. Automated Document Production

A modern court case management system can facilitate production of repetitive court notices, letters, and routine orders. In MACS, documents such as the notice of case filing, which is sent out for each new appeal, the Court of

Essential Characteristics of a Successful Court Case Management System

Supports Multi-Level User Roles and Security. Because of the highly confidential nature of the internal case processing performed by courts, especially appellate courts, prior to case disposition, adequate security features are particularly important in a court CMS. A court case management system must be capable of defining multiple roles that have varying rights and privileges to view, create, or modify various components or information elements within the system. And to maximize efficiency, the case management system should allow the court to modify and maintain these roles and permissions, both in terms of assigning the appropriate roles to specific users and designating the rights and permissions applicable to specific roles as needed.

Appeals’ notice of argument scheduling, and the Supreme Court’s notice of case screening (for consideration with or without oral argument) are among the notices produced by the case management system, using template text merged with case-specific information that is drawn from the MACS case record. Similarly, both the Court of Appeals and the Supreme Court have order templates built into MACS for such common matters as granting or denying extensions of time and motions to participate as an amicus curiae. Using automated document production functionality not only saves user time, but also, because case identifier information is drawn directly from the CMS, reduces the possibility of error, such as typing a case file number incorrectly.

4. Docket Entry Links to Documents

Even if a court does not have e-filing, a CMS can provide a link attached to the relevant docket entry for electronic copies of documents produced by the court, such as orders, opinions, notices, and case correspondence. At a minimum, this document linking provides court CMS users with ready access to court-generated documents filed in a case, or a related appeal, without the need to retrieve the file from the clerk’s office, saving time for both the user and the clerk’s office.

5. Public Version

A modern court case management system can also include a public version that provides electronic access to appropriate case information for users outside the court. Those external users can include counsel, parties, justice system agencies, the media, and the general public.

In addition to the full-featured internal version of MACS, the Minnesota appellate courts provide a public version, P-MACS, available free of charge on the Internet.² P-MACS is a scaled-down version of the CMS that presents the basic case information about each appeal (case title and number, parties, and counsel), as well as the full list of docket entries. The links to electronic copies of court-generated documents are available in the public version, as they are in MACS. Accordingly, the public version allows counsel, parties, and the public to view online any appeal, including its docket entries and the associated court-generated documents.

Counsel can check whether a document has been filed without calling the clerk's office. Availability of electronic documents in the public version further saves the clerk's office from requests for copies of those documents. The public version of the CMS is therefore not only a boon to counsel and litigants, who have more immediate access to information about their cases, but to the clerk's office, whose burden of responding to inquiries about cases and their documents is reduced.

Moreover, the public version provides the public and the media with access to case information that would otherwise be unavailable without either a phone call or visit to the clerk's office. This easily available online access enhances the sense of increased transparency in judicial operations and contributes to the efforts to build public trust and confidence in the judiciary.

6. Docket Entry Notification

Docket Entry (DE) notification is an enhancement added to MACS several years after initial implementation of the CMS. This functionality is something of a variant of the typical tickler system.

The tickler system in MACS uses a rules engine, which is programmed with the various appellate deadlines for different types of appeals, to automatically set ticklers for upcoming events. For example, when an appellant's brief is docketed in a civil appeal in the Supreme Court, MACS automatically sets a tickler for the respondent's brief deadline 30 days after service of the appellant's brief (appropriately adjusting that deadline depending on the method of service of the appellant's brief). These ticklers are primarily useful to identify cases in which a required action has not taken place, so the court can take appropriate corrective action.

In contrast, DE notification provides an email notice to a specified MACS user that a designated event has happened in a case, rather than that an event has not happened, as with an overdue tickler notice. DE notification can be particularly useful in making sure tasks that should be triggered by some future event in a different case do not slip through the cracks.

Essential Characteristics of a Successful Court Case Management System

Capable of Supporting E-Filing. *In my view the salient question about implementation of e-filing in most courts is "when," not "if." Therefore, thinking about court case management systems without considering their relationship to e-filing would be shortsighted. An e-filing that is not integrated with the court's CMS would sacrifice one of the most significant benefits of e-filing: that is, utilizing the data entered by the e-filer to populate the case management system regarding that filing – reducing the data input necessary for docketing in the CMS.*

A prime example is when proceedings in Case B are stayed pending a decision in Case A, in which the court is deciding the same or a related issue. Rather than relying on memory or monitoring of the CMS to be aware that Case A has been decided and action in Case B is now required, responsible court staff can set a DE notification in Case A that will trigger an email message when the opinion is filed, stating that Case B (and potentially numerous other appeals) have been stayed pending that decision in Case A.

Another circumstance in which DE notification has been useful is with high-profile and/or expedited appeals. Responsible court staff or the court information office can set DE notifications so that they receive email messages when anticipated documents are filed in the case, obviating the need for repetitive calls to the clerk's office or frequent checking of the docket.

7. E-Notification

The most recent significant addition to MACS, in July 2011, was implementation of electronic notification – in a sense, an outbound version of e-filing. Electronic notification (e-notification) is functionality that provides electronic copies of court-generated documents to counsel, lower courts, and others on the case distribution list. Instead of receiving a paper copy of a notice or order in the mail a day or more after the document was filed, each recipient is sent an email that contains a link to the electronic version of the document that is attached to the relevant docket entry in the public version of MACS³. The e-notification is sent, by the system, moments after the document has been docketed in the CMS.

² P-MACS can be viewed at <http://macsnc.courts.state.mn.us/ctrack/publicLogin.jsp>

³ For purposes of e-notification, counsel are required to register, and keep updated, an email address. Counsel may register two email addresses for each case, allowing the attorney to designate a co-counsel, paralegal, or legal secretary to receive e-notification. Unrepresented litigants who have access to email may choose to participate in e-notification as well.

For the Minnesota appellate courts, e-notification has provided the most concrete economies. Savings on postage, paper, envelopes, and copier supplies that accrued from eliminating the necessity to produce and mail multiple copies of every notice and order in each appeal were immediate and significant. And the time saved by the clerk's office staff by no longer having to copy outgoing documents and address and stuff mailing envelopes was noticeable. Lower court administrators and appellate counsel also appreciate the efficiency of receiving appellate court documents related to their cases electronically.

8. Reporting and Access to Cumulative Case Data

In addition to the benefit of electronic access to the case docket and attached documents, a modern court CMS can facilitate the courts' access to cumulative information about case processing. The system can provide statistical information that is useful for both internal and public reporting on the nature and volume of the courts' work. The system can also be designed to facilitate access, by canned reports or ad hoc searches, to more detailed information useful in court management of its processes and its resources. By making a wide variety of case-related information available to the courts more efficiently and more effectively, a CMS provides the added benefit of enhancing the courts' ability to foster public awareness of its work and to respond, as appropriate, to inquiries from the legislature, the media, and others.

MACS provides the Minnesota appellate courts with a set of canned reports that provides a variety of both statistical and detailed case data. For example, canned reports provide statistics on the number of case filings and dispositions by case type for each of the appellate courts. Other reports provide more detailed lists of such information as recently filed cases, overdue ticklers, stayed cases, and cases filed pro se.

Beyond the canned reports, MACS allows more effective and efficient access to information about the courts' cases through a feature called enhanced search. Enhanced search allows the court user to search the MACS database for cases based on a variety of criteria that drill down into the case detail. For example, the user can search not only for cases of a particular case type filed within a specified date range, but can query which of those cases are currently in a specific case status, such as the briefing or decision stage. The user can also query based on specific docket entry types – for example, asking in which cases a motion for attorney fees or a petition for rehearing has been filed, or in which cases a certain type of order has been filed.

The granularity of the search capability is determined by the granularity of the options for data entry in any particular data/search field. Thus, the more detailed the options for type of motion or order that can be docketed, the more detailed the search that is possible. And because MACS includes a configuration tool that allows the courts to

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modify or add new options for data entry, such as new case, motion, or order types, without going to the vendor, the courts have flexibility to adjust the system to accommodate changes in both docketing and information retrieval needs.

9. Calendar Processes Automated

A case management system can streamline calendaring processes. For each appellate court, MACS provides functionality that identifies cases that are calendar-ready, a calendar that displays dates designated for argument and the designated number of argument slots for each day, and a process to fill those slots from the calendar-ready list. In the Court of Appeals, which hears cases in three-judge panels that serve together for a set period of time, MACS replaced a complex manual system of sorting the judges and matching them in panels according to the criteria established by the Court. For the Supreme Court, MACS provides a calendar projection report, combining the case status and docketing information for each case with the rules engine knowledge of time periods allocated for each phase of the appeal (e.g., transcript preparation, briefing). The result is a report that lists each pending case in the order in which it is projected to be ready for argument. Having this projection of the cases that will be available for argument months in advance allows court staff to better schedule current calendars and avoid backlogs.

CONCLUSION

In summary, more than a decade of experience with MACS in the Minnesota appellate courts has demonstrated that a modern court case management system delivers not only the functionality that allows the courts to process their cases, but does so in ways that bring added value to the courts. Although that value does not always translate into quantifiable staff or dollar savings, it is definite and significant. The value is reflected, inter alia, in more effective and more efficient processes; better access to more accurate case information for the bench, the bar, the media, and the public; and greater job satisfaction for staff generated by a system that is easier to learn and operate.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Rick Slowes has spent his entire career working in the justice system. After receiving his law degree from Harvard, he worked in the Minnesota Attorney General's Office in multiple roles over the 24 years he spent there. He was focused on litigation, primarily constitutional and complex cases, as an Assistant Attorney General in the Civil Litigation Division before he took on the role of Assistant Solicitor General for the last half of his career at the Attorney General's Office. Rick was a leader in adopting the use of technology for litigation management at the Attorney General's Office.

In 1998, he moved to the Minnesota Supreme Court as the Commissioner of the Court. While at the Supreme Court, he was responsible for advising the Court on a broad range of procedural, substantive, and administrative matters. His legacy includes the pivotal role he played as the Supreme Court representative on the in-house team that worked with Thomson Reuters Court Management Solutions™, in implementing, developing, and enhancing the Minnesota appellate court case management system.

Rick is a thought leader in the industry, receiving many awards throughout his career, including:

- President's Distinguished Service Award, National Association of Attorneys General, 1993.
- United States Supreme Court Best Brief Award, 1995 Term, National Association of Attorneys General, June 1996.
- Public Attorney Award of Excellence, Minnesota State Bar Association Public Law Section, June 1997.
- United States Supreme Court Best Brief Award, 1996 Term, National Association of Attorneys General, June 1997.
- Outstanding Service to the Profession Award, *Minnesota Lawyer*, February 2012.
- Douglas K. Amdahl Public Attorney Career Achievement Award, Minnesota State Bar Association Public Law Section, May 2012.

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