10 WAYS TO MAXIMIZE YOUR E-BILLING AND MATTER MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

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INTRODUCTION

Remember back in elementary school when you had fantasies of becoming the next Eddie Van Halen (stay with me here)? Perhaps you begged your parents for that new guitar and began lessons in earnest—for the first few weeks. You soon found that—gasp!—it took lots of practice and work to get good at that particular stringed instrument and (yawn) soccer season just started and you didn't really feel like practicing. Soon you found yourself plucking "My Dog Has Fleas" less and less. Shortly thereafter you decided to put your guitar hero career on pause, and your closet got a new, permanent occupant.

While this may be a common occurrence of childhood, it may be a surprise to learn that the equivalent also happens to many legal departments when they purchase matter management and e-billing software. How, you ask. A system may be purchased with great expectations. Perhaps the legal department commitment isn't fully there, and it gets minimally implemented. It probably does a couple of things that the legal department wants – maybe some bills are running through or big matters are created – but there's no consistency or guidelines in its use, and there are no plans for improvements to processes. Soon, it goes into the metaphorical closet with the metaphorical (or in my case real) electric guitar. But, just as one can learn to play an instrument through process and practice, a legal department can get value from its system if the legal team prepares correctly and puts in the work. Here are the top ten ways to become an Eddie Van Halen of legal matter management and e-billing software:

1. ASSEMBLE A TEAM

A team needs to be assembled, preferably before implementation, to decide how best to configure the system. First and foremost, a decision-maker in the legal department needs to be on board. This can be the general counsel (GC) or someone who has been assigned the GC's authority for this project. If the rest of the legal department isn't made to believe this project is a priority for their boss, the odds of a systemic change in legal department operations go way down. For a large legal department, you may want a representative from each major practice area to give input into the configuration of the system. It's important to get someone from the accounts payable department on board (or finance depending on how your company is structured) to discuss how invoices will be handled, and someone from IT—especially if there will be integrations with the system. Having this team in place gives the project authority within the department and also includes all other stakeholders so there are no surprises down the road.

2. MAKE GOALS AND KEEP A TIMELINE

So you've gone through implementation, and you've got the system up and running with some core functionality needed for your department. However, if your legal department is coming from a paper world where reporting was minimal, invoices were approved without process, and few billing guidelines were in place, chances are there's still a lot of room for improvement. That's perfectly normal for a legal department getting on a matter management system for the first time. During implementation, there were probably many options and suggestions given by your implementation manager, along with a lot of best-practice advice. Depending on where your legal department started, the options and the effort to implement them may have seemed overwhelming. Here's the key: Prioritize what you would like to implement and make a yearly plan outlining what you want to accomplish.

3. CONSTANTLY IMPROVE

Toyota made famous the concept of kaizen, or constant improvement. This goes along with making and keeping goals for using system features, but constant improvement can be much more than that. It can include making processes more efficient, questioning how things currently are done both in and out of the system, and keeping up with industry trends and applying them to how the legal department is run. Even the most sophisticated legal department can improve because the landscape is always changing. Be sure to change with it.

4. CREATE BILLING GUIDELINES

If you don't have billing guidelines, it is time to create some. One of the great values of a legal e-billing and matter management system is the ability to enforce your billing guidelines with your firms efficiently. But the software can't create your guidelines for you. Look to your account manager to get you started on what other legal departments are doing as far as expense guidelines, timekeeper rates and rate increases, late invoices, etc. Once this is in place (or updated) you can start automating the enforcement of these guidelines in the system, which is real money saved with little or no effort – depending on your department's preference to review billing violations, or employ an auto-reduce or auto-reject functionality to do it for you.

5. HAVE REGULAR MEETINGS WITH YOUR ACCOUNT MANAGER

Account managers should be experts not only on the system and how it works, but also on what other law department clients are doing with the system. They should also be on top of industry trends. This person who is designated to assist your legal department should be able to give you best-practice advice on how to implement your next goal and should even be able to strategize with your team on what the next goal should be based on her experience with many other clients. If you're not already talking to your account manager on a regular basis, a good practice would be to schedule a quarterly call with her and go over your system use and your goals. If there's a feature that you really want in the product, let your account manager know. The voice of the customer should be wildly important to your legal system partner, and they should welcome this input.

6. STAY ON TOP OF NEW RELEASES

The company you've partnered with should be constantly trying to improve their product, adding features that they've heard customers want. They should also have a vision about where the market is heading in the future and be building the system in such a way that it anticipates those future needs. Keep up with these releases and understand the vision so your legal department can keep improving, following best industry practices, and growing with the system.

7. ATTEND CLIENT WEBINARS

This doesn't mean that if you've been on a particular system for seven years, you should attend a basics webinar. This means watching webinars for things such as trends for legal departments, best practices for both using your system and running your legal department, trainings for new users, thought leaders in the legal industry, and deep-dive explanations of new releases or the product roadmap, among others. These will help you save time and keep on top of not only the product, but also market trends.

8. DEVELOP OR UPDATE YOUR IPP

Along with your law-firm-facing billing guidelines, you should also have internal policies and procedures (IPP) addressing your department's use of the system to ensure it's consistently used by your internal team. Why is consistency important? The old database administrator's axiom of "garbage in, garbage out" applies here. If the data is inconsistent going in, your reports will also be. Using the correct matter types or areas of law, naming conventions, or the requirement of budgets or status reports for matters (or when matters should be closed…the list goes on) – all of this affects how these matters and their spending roll up into reports. Regardless of what sort of reports your department heads and GC may want, the data needs to be consistent for the reports to be meaningful. The IPP also should cover who is responsible for what in the system – such as who reviews billing guidelines violations, reviews timekeeper rates, creates matters, has matter responsibilities and matter access, etc. The IPP also serves as a training document for those that are new to your department.

9. ASSESS THE PROFESSIONAL SERVICES OFFERINGS OF YOUR PARTNER

Whether you're brand-new to matter management and e-billing systems, or you've nearly achieved legal department management rock-stardom, it's always a good idea to check out your partner's professional services offerings. The services should be based on what they've seen many clients need, so it may simply be assessment and advice on how to better use the system, or they can provide a helping hand to get you over a certain hump and achieve your goals for the year. It may be as simple as creating complex reports and saving you time or, if you're new, getting you up to speed as quickly as possible. Regardless of your needs, it's always good to revisit how professional services can get your department where you want it to be.

10. REASSESS ALL OF YOUR PROCESSES

You've worked hard, had some minor hits, maybe you've even gotten some "Top 10" airplay. How do you stay on top as a consistent legal department hit-maker? By constantly auditing and reassessing your processes. First, auditing your system to make sure that everyone is complying with your IPP is important to your data integrity. Remember, a GC is relying on these reports to be accurate and may be presenting them to the CEO or the board of directors. Spot-checking for consistency and accuracy in your processes once a quarter is a good rule of thumb. Secondly, your billing guidelines with your law firms should be reviewed annually, preferably before new timekeeper rates come out toward the end of the fiscal year. Are you allowing timekeeper rate increases this year? If so, what percentage raise will be allowed? These answers depend on the state of your company and also the legal market, which changes yearly. You may also want to review what you did that was successful or not successful in the previous year and then tweak your processes as necessary.

If you follow these steps with your e-billing and matter management system, you ensure that your guitar stays lonely in that closet.

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