

EFFICIENT CLIENT INTAKE

by Jeffrey S. Krause, Esq.

An efficient client intake process boosts productivity and enhances your ability to market your firm.

There are a number of reasons why developing and using an intake process within your practice management system makes a lot of sense. The first part of this paper will focus on some of the reasons why you should develop an intake process. Later, I will discuss some of the ways to make it happen.

Streamline Workflow to Process Files More Efficiently

The first reason to create a workflow within a practice management system is to streamline workflow within your office. A well designed and consistently used intake process ensures that your files are opened correctly and makes it far less likely that they will fall through the cracks or otherwise cause problems later.

Many offices have an intake process and a file management system. The problem is that the system is not documented, is seldom reviewed and is not always followed. When your intake and other file management processes are documented, the administrative aspects of your files follow a specific set of rules as they progress through your office. Once your processes are documented, it becomes far easier to consistently complete tasks and to train new employees to perform those tasks. In addition, it gives your attorneys and staff confidence in the system and makes it possible to identify and correct issues in the process.

Collect the Information You Need

Every file requires that you collect certain information from your client. There are certain obvious pieces of information such as the client's name, address and other contact information. What other information would you find valuable? Perhaps you would like to begin sending your clients birthday or anniversary cards. Are you collecting these dates? What about their spouse's name or hobbies? Do you even know how that client learned about your services? There are so many pieces of information that are useful for marketing and other purposes. If your intake process requires specific information, your staff is much more likely to gather it.

continued

About the Author

Jeffrey S. Krause is a Wisconsin attorney and is the owner and founder of Krause Practice Management, LLC, a consultation firm that provides technology advice and service to law firms of all sizes, with a focus on the efficient use of technology in the law office.

Mr. Krause is a Certified Independent Consultant (CIC) for the popular Time Matters Business and Practice Management software as well as Billing Matters, HotDocs and PCLaw. He has worked with Time Matters through its last nine versions and has assisted hundreds of law firms during his ten years as a CIC. He assists law firms with many other popular products including TABS3, Worldox, digital dictation and scanning solutions.

Mr. Krause is a frequent author and speaker on legal technology subjects. His Practice Management Blog (<http://blog.krausepm.com>) covers subjects ranging from law firm marketing to product tips and tricks.



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Phone Inquiries

Related to both streamlining and information gathering is the topic of phone inquiries. In a sense, this is pre-intake information. However, it really is the beginning of the file intake process – at least you hope so. Much of the information you want to collect gets asked verbally during the initial phone inquiry. Are you capturing it?

Avoid Conflict Issues

Conflict checking is an integral and necessary part of practicing law. An intake process needs to make sure that a conflict check is performed, is made against the correct data and is properly interpreted and acted upon. Your intake process can easily meet all of these requirements.

Use Less Paper

A final reason to streamline and automate your intake process is to use and retain less paper. It is possible to use your electronic practice management system in a way that eliminates much of the paper you are currently creating as part of file administration. If your information is collected and stored correctly, there is no need for file info sheets. Checklists can be stored electronically, documents can be scanned and stored electronically and many other administrative tasks can be incorporated into your file intake process.

How?

Phone Inquiries

Efficiently processing phone inquiries is about five things.

First, you need someplace to record all of the vital information. One simple way to record and track this type of information is in a spreadsheet or database. For example, Microsoft Excel or Access can work well for this type of data tracking. The limitations to using these tools are that you have to do all of the setup on your own and they do not necessarily integrate into the other tools you need to adequately track intake. A true practice management system already includes much of the customization and offers you the ability to tweak it further. For example, the Time Matters Phone Form includes most of the critical information but allows an additional 8 User (version 8 and earlier) or Custom (version 9 and higher) fields that you can modify.

Second, you need to make it easy for your staff to create and complete a phone inquiry form. This means that everyone needs access to the spreadsheet or database. In a true practice management system, this means making the phone call list easy to access. Fortunately, most practice management systems either allow this already or provide an easy way to make the list accessible.

Third, you need a delivery mechanism for the phone inquiries. In other words, the data you have gathered during the phone inquiry has to be made available to the appropriate attorneys. Email and instant messaging are two ways to do this. Once again, this is very easy in a practice management application because they often have a delivery mechanism (like the Time Matters Messenger) built in. However, you do this, make sure that the recipients of the messages know how to use the system to delivery and check for messages.

Fourth, your attorneys need to understand the system and how to use it. There should be a list of all calls received and a way to record follow ups and status.

Finally, invest in some training so that everyone knows how the features above work and how they are

supposed to use them.

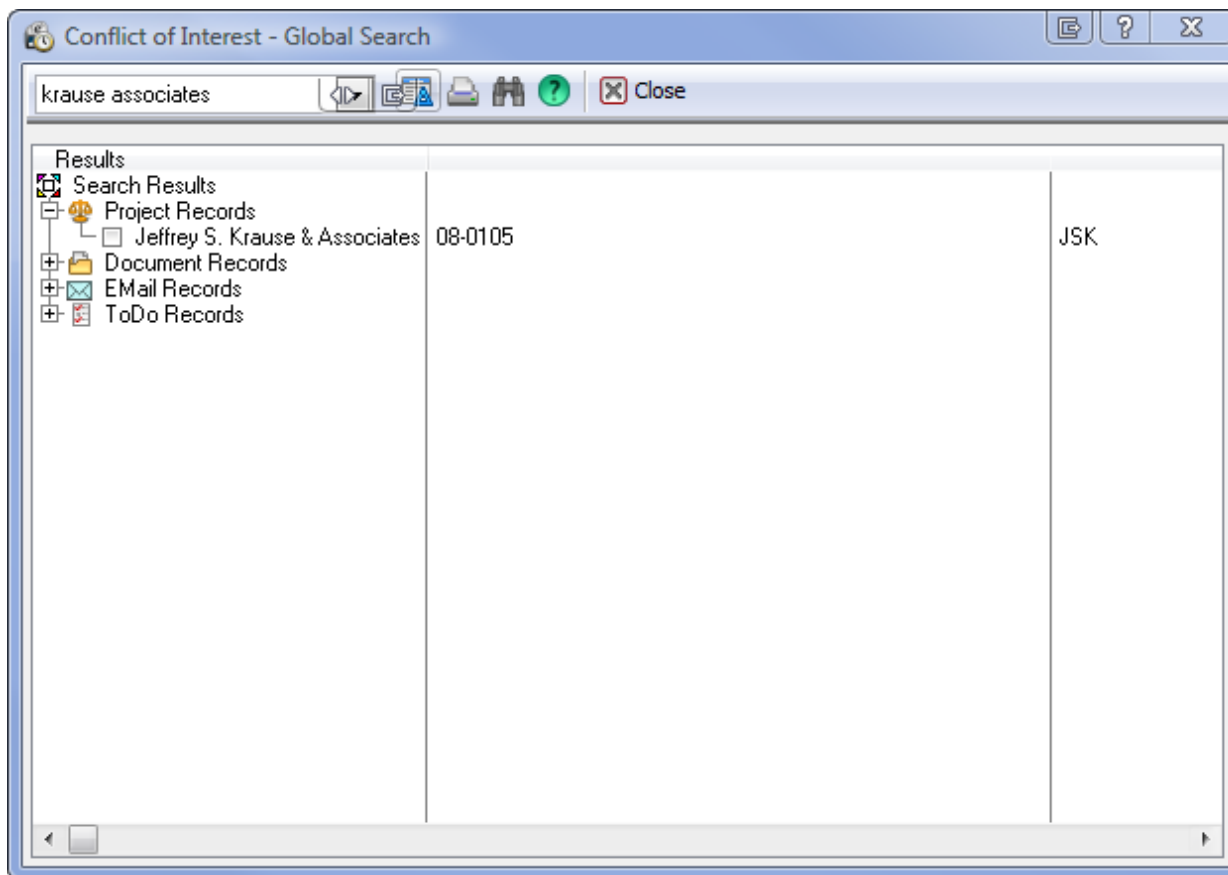
Conflict Searching

A thorough conflict search is vital to the intake process. There is a wide range of conflict checking systems used by law firms – everything from sophisticated database searches to verbally checking with other attorneys. For a complete search, your conflict search must have access to billing data, phone inquiry data, calendars and saved documents. Because this data (hopefully you have it stored electronically) is in various places, it can be difficult to do. In all likelihood, you will have to do multiple searches. A true practice management system makes this much easier because it is tied into all of these systems. For example, Time Matters offers several ways to search everything within the database. More accurately, there is one way with two methods for accessing the search.



To search, simply locate the Search All Records box on your toolbar (add it to your toolbar if it is not already there) and type a search name/term/phrase.

All records found by Time Matters will appear in the search results window.



Other practice management systems have similar ways to perform global searches of the database. Make sure you locate the feature, know how to use it and know how to interpret the results.

Setup Your System Collect the Information You Need

If you are going to collect information on your clients and files, you must customize a system to store and track the information. Your first challenge is to determine what information you would like to collect and exactly how you want to gather and store that information. Start by reviewing your current file sheets for the information you are currently collecting. Determine what information, if any, you would like to collect but are not currently gathering. You also need to note any information that must be shared between your systems.

The next step is to determine where the information will be stored. Some information is “client” related while other information is “matter” related. In other words, some information stays the same if the client returns with another file, while other information is unique to a particular file. In a do-it-yourself system like Excel or Access, you may need multiple spreadsheets and database tables. In a dedicated practice management system, most of the setup work has already been done. For example, in Time Matters, the general rule is that information on Contact forms is somewhat static information about a person or entity. Names, addresses and phone numbers change but not that often. Matter information, on the other hand, tends to be unique to that single matter. All of this makes it easier for your staff to enter the information into the system as opposed to a spreadsheet or database containing multiple tables.

Similarly, once you have determined the information you want to collect, a practice management system makes it much easier to customize to your specific needs. Time Matters is perhaps the most customizable of any system. Customizing a form is as easy as locating a field you want to customize and right clicking on it. There are many customization options.

Field Properties - Contact [Style: Default]

1. Field Descriptions...

Screen Label Screen Tool Tip

Field Name Core Field Name

2. Customize Field...

Text
 Number
 Date
 Time
 Checkbox
 Phone
 Money
 Soc Sec No.
 Email
 Fax
 Web
 Calculated
 Zip Code
 Launcher
 Hidden

Hide Label Audit Required Keywords
 All Caps Spell Check
 Specify Field Entry Choices

Field Lookup Options...

None
 Lookup from Record
 Lookup from File

If you really need a piece of information, don't be afraid to make it required. Assuring that all necessary data is entered into a spreadsheet can be difficult. However, a practice management system will usually include the option to make a field required. This is very useful. However, use it judiciously. If you make too many fields required, it will slow the intake process and make it more difficult for your staff to perform the intake process.

Create, Document and Update Processes

Once you have a system in place, you need to document it and make sure it is used correctly and consistently. Therefore, the next step is to detail in a specific checklist all of the things that make up your intake process in the order that they must happen. There are a lot of reasons to do this.

First, what good is an intake process that is not being followed? Create a checklist for file intake. If you want to make sure the system is followed, this might be the one piece of paper that should be printed on every file. This ensures that each and every file is opened in the same way every time. Consistency!

Second, documenting processes is a great way to get staff involved. What I am referring to is "buy-in." Ask the intake personnel to become involved in putting the checklist together and they have an interest in making it work.

Third, who is going to know and understand your intake process if your intake person walks into your office and quits tomorrow. Creating a checklist is an insurance policy for your business. For this same reason, your checklist needs to be so simple that anyone can follow it. To quote a phrase from a colleague, your checklist should be "Monday Proof" and "Monkey Proof." This means it works every time, even on those bad days, and works no matter who is doing it.

Checklists are easy to create. A simple Word document with three columns works perfectly. Column 1 is labeled "Done" and is used to check items off as they are completed, Column 2 contains the specific step to be done and Column 3 is labeled "Notes" and used for comments and suggestions.

A practice management system provides even more flexibility. Most provide some ability to create checklists as in the example below. Many also include the ability to create these checklists in date dependent formats.

The screenshot displays a software window titled "Outline Form - Add". The window has a menu bar with "File", "View", and "Help". Below the menu bar are buttons for "Save & Close" and "Cancel". The main area is divided into several sections:

- Primary:** Description: Sample Intake Process
- Date:** 8/10/2009
- Time:** 3:12pm - 3:19pm
- Code:** INTA\Intake
- Description:** Sample Intake Process
- Staff:** JSK\Jeffrey S Krause
- Regarding:** KPM Admin
- Reminders:** Follow, Done, Notify, Hide, Trigger, Review, Billable, Private, Status

Below these fields is a toolbar with various icons. The main content area is titled "Elements" and contains a checklist:

- Sample Intake Process
 - 1. Obtain intake paperwork from originating attorney
 - 2. Enter in practice management system(s)
 - 2.1 Create or update client contact record in Time Matters
 - 2.2 Create new matter in Time Matters
 - 2.3 Verify new client/matter has synchronized to PCLaw
 - 3. Create paper file
 - 4. Scan intake paperwork
 - 4.1 Save intake paperwork scans to Time Matters document management
 - 5. Return paper file to responsible attorney

At the bottom of the window, there is a status bar that reads "3. Verify new client/matter has synchronized to PCLaw".

Automate Your System to Avoid Repetitive Data Entry

One aspect of an efficient intake process is extremely difficult in a home-grown system. Incorporating automation makes the process much faster and easier. Most practice management systems include the ability to automate features. For example, creating a new client record can automatically prompt you for a new matter record which, in turn, can prompt you for appropriate billing information.

Without a practice management system, you can still automate some things. Create your documents from templates or develop your own macros if you can. It is not as easy as using a practice management system but every little bit of time you can save through automation is an enhancement to your firm's efficiency and productivity.

Connect to Other Applications

Another important time saver is the ability to connect your practice management system to your other important applications. Of course, this can be difficult with a do-it-yourself system. On the other hand, a practice management system will often include built in links. For example, Time Matters features links to many popular applications including most legal specific billing systems. These links allow you to send information between Time Matters and these other applications.

These links should be a part of your intake process for two reasons. First, the ability to send information between your practice management system and other applications often means that you only have to enter it in one place rather than two. Second, the ability to share information makes it much more likely you will have accurate information in both because your staff will not update one and forget to update the other.

Scan and Save to Time Matters

Now that you have an electronic intake process to add your new clients and matters into the system, do you really need all of that paper you are currently holding onto? A document management system allows you to save documents and find them later using a variety of search methods. With regard to the intake process, one of the most important features of document management is the ability to scan and save documents. There are several critical aspects to scanning documents and saving them to your practice management system. The first is the type of document that is created from the scan.

The most flexible file format for your scanned documents is PDF. PDF scans are preferable because they are easy to save and share. PDFs are especially easy to save into a document management system because most systems integrate with Adobe Acrobat.

Many practice management systems feature some form of document management. For example, Time Matters installs a TM Save button on the toolbar of Adobe Acrobat. This allows you to save any PDF to Time Matters by simply opening the scan and clicking TM Save.

One of the simplest and least expensive ways to scan to Time Matters or any other practice management system is by using the Fujitsu ScanSnap. The ScanSnap ships with a full version of Adobe Acrobat Standard and allows you to "push" scans directly to Acrobat. Once in Acrobat, documents are one click from being saved in Time Matters, thanks to the TM Save button.

Test and Measure

Now that you have all of this data, do something with it! If you are using a home grown system, make sure you develop methods to summarize and report on the data.

Here are some examples reports you might want to consider.

1. A list that shows all matters where no the referral source was not captured so that you can identify files where intake missed this critical information.
2. A list that shows all matters resulting from a specific ad ran in the local community newspaper.
3. A list that shows all matters for the past year, sorted by the referral source.

The possibilities are endless but the point is to run reports and look at them frequently. If Ad #1 cost you \$500 to run and produced 10 clients, your cost per client is \$50. If Ad #2 cost you \$1000 and brought in 14 clients, your cost per client is \$71.43. Which one was more effective?

Now add the value of the case to each matter. Is the story different? Perhaps your \$1000 investment in Ad #2 brought in cases worth much more on average than those brought in by Ad #1.

Hopefully, you are beginning to see the advantages to testing and measuring.

Conclusion

Efficient workflow within your office begins with an efficient intake process. A practice management system, even a home grown one, can help you capture the correct information in an organized and efficient way. Make sure your system includes the specific information you need, links to your existing systems and utilizes automation to save time. While you can build a system on your own, commercial practice management products can be a great way to jump start the process. They can be customized with fields allowing you to capture necessary information regarding phone inquiries, prospective clients and new matters. By capturing this information, your firm can more effectively process files and move them efficiently through the office. This information is also valuable for reporting, marketing and other purposes but it all begins with collecting it in the first place.

About Krause Practice Management, LLC

Krause Practice Management was founded in June, 2007 by Jeffrey S. Krause. KPM provides technology consultation services to law firms and other professional offices of all sizes. They focus on implementing case management, billing and accounting, document management, and document assembly systems.

No firm is too large or too small to work with Krause Practice Management. Jeff Krause has worked with hundreds of firms ranging from solo practitioners to firms with over 100 attorneys.

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