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Law Firm Practice Management Software - A La Carte Alternatives

Step-by-Step: Best-In-Breed Software for the Modern Law Firm

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Law Firm Practice Management Software: The most important decision you'll ever make and why you have to get it right

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Introduction:

Jack of All Trades

Sometimes you buy a software for a few features and then never use the rest and thus, overpay. Law firm practice management (PM) software might not be the best solution for your law practice. Many practice management softwares have one or two killer features and the rest are… adequate or worse. There's a nugget of truth to the phrase, "Jack of all trades, master of none."

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Best in Breed

Modular tools built for specific functions give you the opportunity for best in breed for each task you're trying to accomplish. For instance, Outlook and Google Workspace excel in email functionality, while QuickBooks Online is a top-notch financial platform. Even the Department of Justice utilizes Box.com for their needs. It's worth considering whether an all-in-one software can truly outperform these specialized tools.

Legal Tech Stack

When setting up your law firm's tech stack, focus on the essentials: timekeeping and billing, email, document storage and management, and accounting. Ensure you have a solid foundation in these key areas as they are integral to your day-to-day operations.

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Considerations

Priorities

Understand what features are most important to you. Rank the features. This way, you can compare the specific function of different products.

Necessities

Ask yourself, will I really use all the features in an all-in-one tool? Do I need a full practice management suite or am I better off using tools for specific functions?

Commitment

Will you feed the software the data it needs? These tools are only as good as the data you are willing to add. While it may seem slick, are you and your cohorts willing to invest the time to use it? If you have a closed off, all-in-one system that needs data entry from all of your documents, communications, calendars, and email (just to name a few), is that time well spent? If you end up not liking the software, how will you get the data out?

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Flexibility & Interconnectedness

Can the all-in-one tool integrate for a smooth workflow with my other tools? Make sure you try it out for real and don't just rely on what the sales rep says.

Does it work with the tools I already have? Quickbooks, Box.com, Office365, Google Workspace? Can I integrate these tools into an automated workflow or do I have to do a manual workaround? (deal killer)

The Right Fit

Is the platform or tool built with my size law practice in mind? Will the software accommodate the growth of my law firm?

Starting Off on the Right Foot

Does the software offer onboarding? Am I on my own? What is the extra cost?

Exit Strategy

If I invest into a platform or tool, how difficult will it be to move to another platform if the tool isn't working to my liking?

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Research

Committing to the proper research will not only help you find the right tools for your law firm, but also save money and time. New software tools are built with the idea that your workflows will be automated. As an example, no attorney should ever have to enter time more than once with a new timekeeping and billing software.

LeanLaw Software Buyers Guide

FREE DOWNLOAD

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Law Firm Practice Management Software: Do you need it? Will you use it?

According to the American Bar Association, practice management (PM) software "provides attorneys with a convenient method of effectively managing client and case information, including contacts, calendaring, documents, and other specifics by facilitating automation in law practices."

When considering PM software for your law firm, it's crucial to assess whether the tool meets your needs and will be utilized effectively. Remember that a well-designed tech stack should prioritize key workflows like timekeeping and billing, while seamlessly integrating with other essential tools such as accounting software and document management systems. Keep these considerations in mind to build a tech stack that serves your law firm's unique requirements and helps you achieve your goals.

Core Workflow

A well-designed timekeeping and billing (T&B) workflow is crucial for law firms, as it ensures cash flow and justifies client charges. T&B also feeds into accounting and business intelligence workflows, providing insights into productivity, profitability, and work in progress.

If the PM software you are considering doesn't delight you for timekeeping and billing, move on.

Choose a PM software that excels in T&B and is user-friendly for all attorneys. Consider alternative fee arrangements, automated trust account management, LEDES, and electronic payments to streamline invoicing and improve profitability.

Even if your clients don't pay with electronic payments today, understand that that is your goal. Electronic payments will lower your overhead, reduce your AR, and naturally increase profitability and cash flow. A T&B system that has ePayments built-in is going to be essential.

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Does the Timekeeping and Billing Software Integrate with the Accounting Software?

Ensure that the T&B software integrates seamlessly with your accounting software to avoid manual data entry and associated costs. Many PM tools claim to integrate, but really just dump general ledger entries into the accounting software for someone to clean up later. This costs you money and headaches due to real-time integration.

If you're not satisfied with the T&B features in a PM software, explore standalone products.

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Can You Integrate Your Favorite Apps Into Your Practice Management Software?

Once you've found a T&B tool that meets your needs, evaluate its compatibility with other critical workflows, such as communication, scheduling, document management, and case management. Be cautious of PM software that doesn't excel in these areas, as it may lead to underutilized features and a sense of overpayment.

Why would you use the email box or contact list in PM software when you have Outlook or Google Workspace? Why would you use the document management features if you like Box, Dropbox or OneDrive?

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Will You Be Disciplined to Load the Necessary Data Into Your PM Software?

There are firms that succeed with PM software. The key is to be willing to enter a lot of data into the tool, with continual extra steps beyond your usual workflow. Ask yourself if you are willing to dedicate the resources to feed your contacts, emails, documents, and client and case information into your PM tool, because this is what you need to do to take advantage of all the features. Give this a serious try during your trial period to see if you will actually do it.

Stakeholders' Opinion

Buying new software for your law firm is a serious research project. If you get it right, you can save not only money but hours of time that will pay huge productivity dividends in the future. And if you are not a solo attorney, your law firm colleagues must also like the software and be open to using it in order to get what you pay for. You don't want to be the one who bought ANOTHER software suite that everyone hates.

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Research
Best of Breed / Law Tech Stack

If you buy a la carte software, you must identify which workflow is the most important. Remember, a workflow is just a repeatable sequence of processes needed to complete a task. Everyone has different ideas about core workflow. For some, it's Timekeeping and Billing. For others email or document management. There is no right answer. You know your practice best.

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Workflow assessments

Email

Top Vendors: GSuite vs. Office 365

- Here's the big difference: If you love Outlook, Office365 works well and plays into the other Microsoft apps. It's very convenient to bundle the subscription and receive professional email and the office apps in one payment. Office 365 allows you to bundle in apps (Word, Excel, Outlook, Sharepoint, etc) with one user license, which is convenient.

- If you like Gmail, Google Workspace really works well and it's easy to set up. Google has a robust app store. And superior support. Google Workspace comes with Google Docs for free and works great on mobile (Android and iOS).

- Both Office 365 and Google:

    » Operate on secure, Cloud-based infrastructure

    » Enable you to share across calendar, email and contacts with your associates and clients

    » Allow sync across all of your devices.

    » Give you fully encrypted email for secure communication with clients

For most users, the simple question is do you like Gmail or Outlook?

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Consideration:

The more you open your email in a browser (Chrome, Safari, Firefox) the easier the IT management. In this case, you would lean toward Google.

Document Management

**Top Vendors:** Box.com and NetDocuments. Dropbox, OneDrive, and Google Drive are popular as well.

We have a blog post that tackles the difference between NetDocuments and Box.com. We prefer Box.com, although NetDocuments is a great solution as well. Box.com won out with cost, robustness of the app, integration and workflow accessibility. The main differentiator is that NetDocuments creates an integrated workflow whereas Box is more of a storage and collaboration tool where you have to develop your own workflow.

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Considerations when you choose a document management system:

- Number of users, including collaborators outside your organization - this could add to the cost.

- What will the data look like when accessing from your tablet or other secondary devices?

- Total storage size and the maximum size of a single file.

- How will data be organized, tagged, and managed?

- Integration with other key tools -- Office 365, Google Workspace, Practice Management. If it doesn't integrate, there's no point, no matter how sleek the software.

- Can my tool provide user "rights" to ensure the right users have access and others do not?

- Does the tool allow for the migration of data from one user to another? Think: staff member leaving? Where does that data go?

- Can I migrate my data easily to another tool?

To get a real sense of the tool, take one matter and test the tool. Using it is the only way to truly tell how it's going to work.
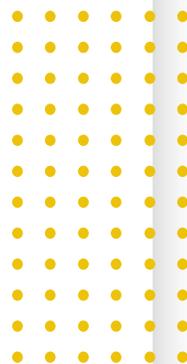
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Timekeeping and Billing

**Top Vendors:** LeanLaw, Tabs3, PCLaw, ProLaw, Juris

- LeanLaw focuses on midsize and small law firms. LeanLaw is an all-in-one financial management system for your law firm. From soup to nuts: timekeeping, billing, IOLTA trust retainers, reporting, expenses, ePayments -- LeanLaw is a premier app and the top-rated legal app in the QuickBooks Online App Store and has the deepest integration with QuickBooks Online.

- **Workflow.** Assess in terms of timekeeping, time sheets, invoice draft, invoice approval, invoice delivery and invoice tracking - all the steps involved.

Considerations

- » **Prioritize timekeeping.** If you can't track time, you can't bill time. Are there multiple ways to enter time? Mobile app, calendar view, timers. Each timekeeper has a different idea of what they like best.

- » **Don't enter data twice.** Yellow pads waste time. Retyping an invoice wastes time.

- » **User interface** - does it feel intuitive? Timekeepers use the tool every day. If it doesn't feel good, it'll be difficult to get them to track time.

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- **Flexibility:** How do you need to structure your billing? Your software needs to be able to flow with how you bill. This is important.
  - » Flat fee
  - » Hourly
  - » Contingency
  - » IOLTA Trust Retainers that are compliant with the American Bar Association
  - » Hybrid

- **Overhead:** The billing workflow fuels a lot of administrative overhead in most law firms. You can save a lot of money if you automate your timekeeping into your invoicing and then ultimately, into your accounting as well.

- **Data:** What data is most important to you? Can you extract it from the software? If you can extract insights from the data you create, you can run a more efficient business. Once you set it up in LeanLaw, you will have continual, real-time access to this data.
  - » Originating Attorney Fees
  - » Attorney Compensation
  - » WIP
  - » How much billed
  - » How much collected
  - » Timekeeper Reports
  - » Client Reports
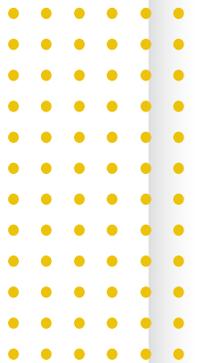
Payments:

Top Vendors: LeanLaw Payments, Intuit Payments Network, Law Pay, Gravity Legal

How do you want to get paid? The more efficiently you produce an invoice, the faster you will be paid by your client. If you integrate trust payments, even faster.

- Does the platform allow for electronic payment?

- How much manual work is involved in tracking those electronic payments?

- Can you replace checks with ACH?

- Does the tool allow you to see if the email sending the invoice was opened? LeanLaw does.

- Do the clients see their trust balance on the invoice? (They do in LeanLaw)

LeanLaw Payments

LeanLaw's electronic and automated payment system helps law firms collect more, collect faster, and collect at a lower cost. With LeanLaw's Intelligent Invoice, the law firm client receives an AI-generated narrative summary of the services listed on the invoice, a personalized link to pay, and payment options (ACH, credit, or retainer).

LeanLaw advocates the Best in Breed approach to managing your practice.

We can advise you on how to set up a suite of tools and get them to work together in an automated way. We work with law firm technology consultants that understand law firm needs and workflows.

Using best-in-breed is a more efficient system because you have hand-picked each software based on your needs rather than buying practice management software where feature quality can vary widely.

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Timekeeping & Billing is the Core Workflow

Legal timekeeping is how most attorneys generate revenue, so if you don't track time, you don't get paid. It's that simple. And if you don't track your time each day, you will lose serious income.

How serious? Tardy timekeeping can cost you $25,000 to $100,000 year. Ridiculous, you say?

Not so. The amount you lose if you don't keep time contemporaneously is shocking. According to studies compiled by Ann Guinn, if you don't get your time in by the end of the day, you're likely to lose 10 percent of your billable hours. If you don't get it in the next day, you'll lose 25 percent. If you don't get it in by the end of the week, you'll lose a full 50 percent.

Realistically, that means you'll be making up what you put on your timesheet. Your clients will sense something is wrong, making it more likely you won't get paid or your bill will be contested. And then you have to spend time explaining the bill to them - if you can remember. And that takes time. And time you spend explaining a bill is time when you're not earning. Vicious, right?

Habit Forming Timekeeping

This is why LeanLaw believes that your core legal workflow has to be timekeeping and billing. Lawyers need to get into the habit of doing it daily.

Creating a lean law firm is not just about technology, but also about behavior change -- and that's very personal. You will help yourself by using software that makes that change as effortless as possible.

Some habits are easy, but some, like timekeeping, are not so appealing. Your timekeeping and billing software should be designed to make the billing workflow to be as simple as possible and help you get into the habit of keeping time every day. Here are some considerations when looking at T&B Software:

On Your Favorite Device, Wherever You Are

Desktop, Laptop, Tablet, Mobile, iOS or Android -- you need software to make it easy to enter time in seconds on whichever device is most convenient for you.

Never Enter Your Time More Than Once

Once you have entered your time, it should carry over into your invoices and then into your accounting. Total automation will save time and avoid mistakes.

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How Law Firms Become Better Businesses

Get Real Time Data

LeanLaw's reporting features give the law firm solid, real-time data to make decisions to improve the law practice operations.

- Trust Balance
- Timekeeper Reports
- Attorney Compensation Reports
- Origination Reports
- Ready to Bill, Billed, Paid

When you know how productive your timekeepers are, how quickly your clients pay you, who brought the client to the firm, and how many write-downs you had to cover over a period of time, you can make more informed decisions about how to structure your law firm.
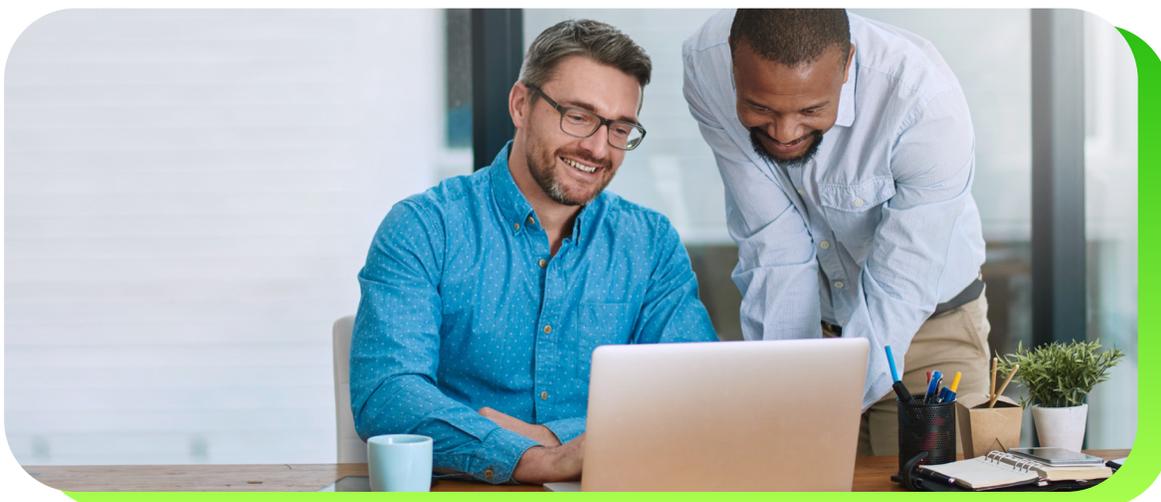
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# Increase Cash Flow

Automate Timekeeping and Invoicing

When you keep time electronically in LeanLaw -- on your phone, on your PC, wherever feels good to you -- you can automatically push the details of the time entered to your invoice. You're halfway there. And you don't have to ask anyone to type it up for you -- you can make any changes right in the draft invoice.

LeanLaw's Deep Integration into QuickBooks Online

LEARN MORE

Electronic Invoicing

Instead of sending a paper invoice, an electronic invoice arrives immediately. And if you provide a way for the client to pay online, you're giving them no reason to postpone payment. They can click the payment button then and there. LeanLaw gives you the opportunity to use the Intuit Payment Network which expedites the payment process -- all natively built into the workflow.
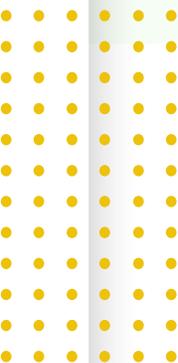
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Trust Accounting

If you take IOLTA trust retainers, you can get paid immediately. LeanLaw turns what was once a daunting 12-step process in QuickBooks into just a few clicks. Gravity Legal has partnered with LeanLaw to make the process even smoother by eliminating the busy work through automated trust requests and associated payments. Payments can be made through bank transfers instead of credit cards which will reduce your fees by 60-80%.

Conclusion

When you stack best-in-breed apps to service your law firm, you do not compromise. The apps listed all integrate with each other and with QuickBooks Online - the premier accounting app.

LeanLaw offers demos, free trials and helps you transfer your data when onboarding, so really, there's no reason not to check it out.

If you can increase your cash flow through better legal timekeeping and billing, you can practice the kind of law you're truly passionate about, rather than having to accept every client who walks through your door. That will give you more joy in your work and make you want to become more efficient and more lean.

LeanLaw is the all-in-one financial operating system for your law firm. We can help you get started.

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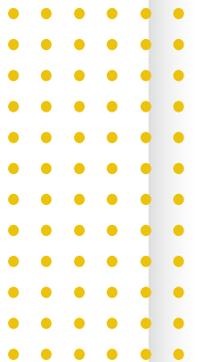
Articles to Consider

**Tech Stack Solutions
for the Midsize Law Firm**

**Law Firm Automation 2.0:
The Power of a Tailored Legal Tech
Stack over an All-in-One Solution**

**Case Study: 30% Savings on
Software Law Firm Dumps Thomson
Reuters, Creates Tech Stack**

**Case Study: $60K Savings
for Law Firm by implementing
LeanLaw tech stack**

EXIT **1A**

**TOO MUCH
OVERHEAD**

EXIT ⬇ ONLY

**Tech Stack: How to
Recession-Proof Your Law Firm**

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