

Prepare Your Law Firm Tech For Coronavirus Impact

By **Thomas Robertson and Kenneth Jones** (March 2, 2020)

One can only hope that the dire forecasts of a global coronavirus pandemic don't come to fruition. However, keeping in mind that discretion is the better part of valor, what are some specific areas law firms should focus on as we all hope for the best but prepare for the worst?

Remote access is more than just basic workstation connectivity. We all read how companies need to prepare for the possibility of working remotely. But what are some specific technology-based considerations facing law firms or others working in the legal operations field? There is a bit more to this area than the obvious processes — accessing email, working within a document management system, entering time and interacting with the firm's accounting system. Here's a few that come to mind.

System Access — Capacity

Depending on how much a law firm has embraced the cloud, or perhaps not engaged with the Amazon Web Services and Microsoft Azures of the world at all, this topic has various, complex implications. But some considerations span both on-premises (data stored within a law firm's four walls) and cloud-based environments.

Do you have sufficient licenses and capacity to support every employee in the firm stressing against your remote infrastructure at the same time? If you have general access to research areas like Westlaw or your state's books on court rules, do you have enough online licenses to ramp up for those who generally use bound volumes in the office? And can employees access the same network shared drives and other resources they typically use in the office?

If any of these are issues, it's probably a good time to put together contingency plans now rather than later.

System Access — Security

We all have many systems and databases we access on a daily basis. Many of them are bookmarked in our internet browsers. Do employees have the same bookmarks stored at home? If a system requires a browser plug-in to properly function, do we know employees have that up and running on their remote workstation?

We all know credentials should not be stored in local browsers, but sometimes they are. In these instances, do we know employees can access resources like court sites for electronic filing, e-discovery systems in the cloud or client-based resources? Probably not. So the lesson learned here might be to do some walkthroughs or practicing remote access now, before a crisis is upon us.

Calendaring

Meeting court deadlines, attending depositions and a myriad of other legal functions are at the core of any law firm's service offering. Thus, access to calendaring systems is vital. If a



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law firm has a centralized, cloud-based system up and running, congratulations, you are probably in great shape.

Deadlines stored on local machines in Excel or Word files, or perhaps in Outlook calendars harder to access remotely than locally, are another animal. Confirming all due dates can be accessed and managed remotely is a solid exercise in advance of a crisis.

Telephonic Considerations

Even today, of course, a good bit of business communication occurs on the good old-fashioned Alexander Graham Bell-like device! But what happens if employees can't get to the office? Can calls to direct dial lines be remotely forwarded? How about calls to the main number or incoming faxes?

If a law firm doesn't have relationships with companies like Ringcentral Inc. and Mitel Networks Corporation to previously create soft phones and apps for calls on smartphones, there might not be time to put a sophisticated plan in place. But sophistication really isn't mandatory here. A basic plan for forwarding phones to employee cellphones works just fine (as long as all the cellphones are documented and the tasks of executing such forwarding is clearly defined).

Remote Conferencing Services

Good news on this front. Even if a law firm does not have a firmwide implementation of a service like Zoom, WebEx, Microsoft Teams, etc., there is time to hop on board that train. Many of the services issue free tiers of service for basic use such as one-on-one meetings of a limited duration. Expanding service levels with existing providers isn't that hard either. Not being able to meet face-to-face is not ideal, but remote conferencing services can help bridge that gap for sure.

Custom Paper Functions

I can't think of any organization that doesn't have certain customized paper functions that could be problematic if working in the office became a problem. One facing many law firms is the check printing function. Whether it is for general business or for client trust purposes, it is essential that law firms have the ability to cut checks on short notice. To accomplish this, creating secondary locations with whatever is needed (expertise, printers, check stock) must be done.

Of course, relying on more advanced strategies like wire transfers is also an option, but it's a tad risky to assume a rarely used process could meet each and every demand of the business on a moment's notice.

Some other functions, such as enabling employees to print and overnight mail documents from their homes, also must be given thought. And, finally, in certain circumstances it might be necessary to examine what additional classes of data might be permitted off-premises, and if such permission is granted what incremental protective messages are required (e.g. strong passwords/passphrase/encrypted-at-rest).

Some Final Security Thoughts

We are talking about dealing with a crisis in this piece, not long-ranging security considerations. That being said, thinking about concepts like remote enrollment of devices

using technologies like Microsoft Intune is something one might wish to do sooner rather than later. No law firm wants employees working with client data on, for example, a Windows 7 machine with no antivirus protection and a hard drive which is not encrypted.

A bit of upfront planning before doomsday strikes can serve as a protective barrier against crime threats in a situation such as the coronavirus forcing law firms into contingency planning mode.

Summing Up

For now, like most companies in the United States, law firms are still in a bit of the calm before the storm. Now's a great time to think about the technology-based equivalent of boarding up the windows and putting together emergency kits with one's critical medications and the like.

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