

BizNet™
Technology Report
for
Mississippi
Businesses
2009

With Supplement for Law Offices

An overview of hardware,
software and services used by
Mississippi businesses.

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Introduction

Every business owner wants the same thing from their technology investment - to help him or her make money. Exactly how that happens will be different for every business, but there are some requirements that apply across the board. In general, every business owner wants:

- Infrastructure that is reliable, stable, speedy, and expandable
- Information that is handled efficiently by a productive staff
- Data that is backed up and protected
- Systems that run smoothly and are safe from spyware, viruses and malware
- Administrative procedures that save time and money
- Peace of mind knowing that, technology-wise, someone is looking out for them

Why do so many businesses struggle with these issues?

Cost can be an issue, primarily because it can be difficult to put an exact dollar figure on money made or saved by a particular decision. The amount of research required or the prospect of a steep learning curve in implementing a new system can be daunting. Changing things from the way they are currently being done can seem like a “black hole” of money and time with no limits in sight, especially for those businesses that do not have a well-rounded technical consultant to guide them.

So what is the solution?

The solution is not some piece of hardware or software; it is a process that you **MUST** go through if you truly want to find the best solution for your business. This process begins with establishing a base level of knowledge of what technology solutions are available to you. With this knowledge you can make the best decisions about the systems that will meet your needs. Then, working with the proper vendors and consultants, you can implement the systems that will best support you and your business in the long term.

How do you get started?

Step number one is to read and understand this document. It will give you an overview of issues and news facing other business owners. Please pay special attention to the section entitled “The #1 Technology Decision for any Business to Make,” This section addresses the single decision that can simplify your systems, streamline your operations, and set the course for all of your technology purchasing decisions down the road.

Technology Report

In general, 2008 was a good year for technology in Mississippi.

The positive technology trend witnessed in 2007 extended into 2008 as most businesses continued to make long-term investments in equipment, software and services. Specifically, many companies invested in new servers, new workstations – most with very large monitors or dual-screens, new high-speed internet services, new software systems, and new backup technologies. Many vendors rolled out new products and services in Mississippi, especially in the areas of cell phone data services, high-speed internet connectivity, remote data backup, and network monitoring. Many businesses moved to a new location in the last year, and they took that opportunity to upgrade their systems and try out new vendors for phone service, phone systems, and internet connectivity. All in all, especially despite the economic downturn later in the year, Mississippi businesses maintained a positive attitude about technology purchases.

In analyzing the problems and issues of the 48 new entities/projects that Matrix Solutions added to its books last year, along with issues that we handled for our existing clients, we have come up with some interesting trends and patterns. Analyzing this data could be helpful in making recommendations for the coming year.

I have found that in discussions of office technology, it is helpful to divide topics into 5 categories as follows:

INFORMATION HANDLING	capacity, organization, performance, procedures
DATA PROTECTION	data backup, network monitoring, off-site storage
SECURITY	firewalls, passwords, anti-virus, anti-SPAM
INFRASTRUCTURE	hardware, software, wiring, servers, switches, routers
ADMINISTRATION	documentation, training, awareness, procedures

While there is some overlap between the categories, this breakdown will provide a useful framework in which to review and discuss technology issues.

Before we get into the heart of the report, I would like to tell you about the organizations that have it easy.....

Who had the EASIEST time making technology decisions last year?

One category of businesses had the easiest time making technology decisions last year – those that have implemented ‘practice management’ systems. By definition, a ‘practice management’ system is an integrated software system that can be used to help run multiple phases of your business. In general, this system has functions that handle all or most of your primary, day-to-day business operations:

For a medical office, this means a single system to schedule appointments, track charges, submit insurance claims, scan ID cards, track patient demographics, manage medical records, print accounting reports, etc.

For a law office, this means a single system to manage client communications, track legal deadlines, manage timekeepers, track time, create invoices, track payables, etc.

For an insurance-related business, this means a single system to prepare quotes, track claims, manage renewals, handle documents, print management reports, etc.

There are many great software programs available, like Quickbooks, Outlook, Timeslips, Act, WorlDOX, iMANAGE, Goldmine, PCLaw, etc. However, none of these can be considered ‘practice management’ software packages. These programs may be individually helpful and useful, but they alone cannot be used to run your business effectively. Therefore they cannot be the sole basis for directing the technology path of your business.

By every measure, and this is important, ***firms that implement a practice management system have the easiest time making technology decisions.***

Why? Because the practice management system that you choose will have guidelines for equipment like servers and workstations, peripherals like printers and scanners, and systems like email and remote access. They will also have a framework that will allow you to implement your business processes, like working with new clients, handling email attachments, and handling documents.

In the industries that we serve, which include legal, medical, and insurance-related businesses, many organizations have implemented practice management software systems specifically designed to run their businesses. These are the organizations that are the most efficient, have the least amount of trouble, and are in the best position to maximize their technology investments in the years to come.

That’s why I say that the decision to implement a practice management software system is **The #1 Technology Decision for any Business to Make.**

You CAN take it with you - Remote Email

In 2008, PDAs replace laptops, remote desktop access, and webmail as the remote email system of choice. Blackberry still leads the way with their 'push' email technology, but Apple has stolen some of the thunder with their sleek iPhone, even with its 'pull' email technology. In addition, Apple has been slow to offer integration that works well in a business environment. Apple is making inroads to businesses with new releases of their phone operating system. Blackberry has countered with their new touch-screen phone, but it is going to be tough to out-market Apple. **Recommendation:** For now, the Blackberry continues to be the best choice for remote email.

In Sync - Synchronizing data with your PDA

We spent a lot of time in 2008 working on synchronization issues – getting data from a firms' central management systems into their PDAs. We manage several business networks that use Blackberry Enterprise Server, the software that automatically synchronizes data between Blackberry devices and Microsoft Exchange Server (Email, Calendar, Contacts, Tasks, etc.) The cost of this software far outweighs the cost and frustration of having everyone manually synchronize their data. **Recommendation:** If synching is important, invest in a server-based synchronization system. Your initial costs will be higher but it will be less expensive to maintain over the long run.

Going Paperless – the search for the best scanning solution

We sold a ton of Fujitsu ScanSnap desktop scanners last year, and here's why: Centralized network/copier/scanners/fax systems are often viewed as a necessary piece of office equipment, primarily because of the copying and printing functions. While useful for scanning large jobs, they may not work well for routine scanning in the quest for the paperless office. If your daily process involves large number of very small scan jobs throughout the day, a desktop scanner is your best bet. **Recommendation:** If you have to have a network copier/printer, then get one with scanning capabilities for your larger jobs. If you want to start scanning 'everything,' then your best bet is a desktop scanner like the ScanSnap.

Are you retaining Email ? - Email Storage

In 2008, email systems started to 'crack.' In my view, the 'email revolution' began around 2003 with the release of Office 2003 and the server component Exchange 2003. The use of email skyrocketed because these products looked great, were intuitive, were very stable, and had many great user-side and server-side features. Email, once perceived as a simple method of communication, has become viewed as a permanent repository of all data - personal and work communications, do-lists, delegation systems, appointments, reminders, document archives, tickler systems, interoffice messages, and more. As email usage increased, the storage demands of saving all of the email increased. This email now had to be backed up but restorable, archived but available, out of the way yet accessible. In 2008, things really came to a head and we began to see many cases of email overload. People were astonished to find out that Outlook was not designed to work with an infinite number of email messages in the Inbox. It became a real burden to 'carry around' five year's worth of email, to back it up, to archive it, to deal with it. Systems had to be put in place to handle the massive amounts of stored email data.

Recommendations: 1) The best solution is to invest in a practice management software package that is designed to store and manage client-related emails, relieving Outlook of the long-term storage responsibilities. 2) Implement an email retention policy, which includes firm-wide instructions for auto-archiving and auto-purging of old emails. 3) Install a hardware email archiving appliance, which is designed to keep a copy of all incoming and outgoing emails in an accessible, easily searchable format. 4) Consider email archiving services, like those from Google's POSTINI. They offer off-site archiving with search capability for a flat fee per user per month.

DATA PROTECTION

The Good Kind of SpyWare - Monitoring internet usage in your office

We rolled out several systems last year to help managers monitor the use of the internet within their office network. In some cases the employees were told they were being monitored, and in other cases it was kept a secret. In general, these systems track users' activities and report on web sites visited, time spent on each web site, etc. Smaller systems are software add-ons to the network firewall and can report on internet usage only. More sophisticated systems track usage on each workstation and can include document tracking, email usage, and even keystroke logging. **Recommendation:** Implementing a network monitoring system can give you the tools to help you track and enforce an acceptable-use policy.

Remote Backup - Backing up data via the internet

In 2008, several companies began aggressively marketing software and services that allow you to back up your data via the internet. Data is usually stored in encrypted format in large data warehouses. Users are charged a flat annual fee or an amount based on the amount of data that you store. These systems work well for large numbers of small files, like documents and small data files. They do not work as well for large files, like backups of your applications, backing up email, and large database backups. These services work well for restoring individual files but do not work well for wholesale data restores, since it may take up to several days to restore a large data set. **Recommendation:** As part of your overall data protection plan, we recommend having a remote backup service to back up your documents, application backup files, and other small data files.

Data to Go - External USB Hard Drives

In 2008, these devices became extremely popular as the price to storage size ration fell to an all-time low. Readily available at big-box electronic stores, these systems consist of a hard drive and adapter card packed inside a slick case. Some require external power connection and some are powered via the USB connection. These are awesome devices for backing up data and copying data between systems. Our technicians carry one or two with them at all times. We also place one device on each of our clients' servers and configure the system to make a 'flash' backup copy of all of the appropriate files to the device each night. In an emergency, these devices can quickly be unplugged and taken with you – earning the nickname 'Katrina Drives.' **Recommendations:** We recommend Katrina drives as part of your overall data protection plan. We recommend one each server, and one or two of the devices available for miscellaneous use. We do NOT recommend Katrina drives as the only backup device in an office.

SECURITY

Disaster Recovery – It could happen to you

We handled a few disasters in 2008. In general, we found that a good tape backup system provided the quickest recovery time. Having multiple backup systems in-place, like Katrina Drives and remote backup services, proved beneficial in locating the most ‘current’ set of data. Backup systems that are not monitored, tested on a regular basis, and taken off-site are worthless. Finally, having good documentation, like configuration information, passwords, and licenses, can significantly speed up the recover process. **Recommendations:** Have a written disaster recovery plan and understand the time and expense involved in recovering from a disaster. Make sure your backup system is monitored and tested on a regular basis. Make sure data is taken off-site.

Gone Phishing – Viruses, Spyware and other Mal-ware

2008 was an active year for ‘malware,’ the catch-all name that refers to any malicious software. The current crop of malware is not interested in damaging your computer. In fact, they want to keep your system up and active so that they can monitor your activity, sell your personal information to marketers, and hijack your machine to send SPAM or to launch an attack on a third party. What this does to you is it interferes with your work by causing slowness and other workstation problems. Symptoms include pop-ups, extra toolbars, workstation slowness, and browser hijacking. **Recommendations:** 1) Implement Postini Anti-Spam/Anti-Virus email filtering to prevent malware from reaching your business network. 2) Install a hardware firewall to protect attacks via your internet connection. 3) Implement a corporate anti-virus solution to monitor activity on your servers and workstations. 4) Train your users to periodically run spyware detection and removal tools. 5) Implement periodic training and awareness seminars to keep your staff updated.

SPAM SPAM SPAM SPAM

One web site reported that SPAM, or unwanted email, now accounts for over 90% of all email! Over the years we have tried ‘junk mail’ filters, programs that run on each workstation, and software that runs on the server. By far the best solution is to outsource the email filtering. This process involves pointing your ‘mail records’ to flow through the filtering company on its way to your mail servers. This blocks the SPAM before it has to be dealt with on your servers. It’s the only way to go. **Recommendation:** Implement Postini Anti-Spam/Anti-Virus email filtering to prevent malware from reaching your business network.

The More the Merrier - Firewalls and Redundant Internet Connections

With the availability of low-cost, high speed internet connections, many organizations implemented redundant internet connections last year. A hardware firewall manages the data traffic between an office network and the internet, so it is the logical place to implement the redundant connection. We installed several new firewalls in 2008 that can share the load between two internet connections or auto-failover from one connection to the other. **Recommendations:** If connection to the internet is CRITICAL for your business, then we recommend and at least two internet connections from different vendors and a new firewall capable of managing the connections.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Can everything be outsourced? Application Service Providers (ASPs) think so.

The prospect is intriguing – outsourcing your entire network infrastructure. All you need is a PC and an internet connection. Let someone else worry about backups, upgrades, virus protection, etc. Is it really that easy?

Application Service Providers, or ASPs, deliver software to you as a service. For a fixed monthly fee, you can log into their system from any internet-enabled computer and have access to the software that they provide. Some ASPs are specific – offering internet access to their proprietary software systems. Other ASPs are more generic, offering access to standard office software like Microsoft Office.

We work with many clients using specialized ASPs for some or all of their business functions. Some successful implementations include ASPs that provide online access to specialized systems like medical office practice management systems and insurance agency management systems. In all of these cases, the majority of the daily functions are performed via the ASP. In other words, not much is happening on the local network inside of the business.

‘Generic’ ASPs provide access to general office functions and applications like Outlook, Microsoft Office, file storage space, etc. If those functions are all you need, then an ASP may work for you. But if you run a large number of ‘utility’ programs on your workstation, or if your firm has its own specialized management software, then depending on an ASP to install, configure and maintain these applications may prove to be too difficult.

Recommendations: Choose a practice management software package to run your business. If the vendor is an ASP and offers that software delivered to you via the internet, then consider it.

Great Expectations – Microsoft’s Vista Operating System

In 2008, the first service release for Microsoft Vista appeared. Shortly thereafter, several software vendors released their ‘Vista-compatible’ versions. This certainly helped, but did not solve all of the problems. After threatening to discontinue Windows XP, Microsoft (Thank Goodness) extended sale of WindowsXP several times throughout the year. Hardware vendors like Dell began selling workstations and laptops with Windows XP that included a license to upgrade to Vista. While it seemed like a good transition step, we do not know of one single person that used this procedure to upgrade to Vista! In Vista’s defense, we do have some clients successfully using Vista in their office and several using Vista on roaming/home laptops. In our office, Vista has worked without much problem since we upgraded our servers from Windows Server 2003 to Windows Server 2008. **Recommendation:** Ride your current systems as long as you can and plan on upgrading late this year or early next year when the next new operating system, Windows 7, is released. If you must buy new systems this year, stick with the XP/Vista combo, but get as much memory, processor, hard drive space as you can afford.

T-1's are not what they used to be - Phone and Internet Service Providers

For a while, the trend was to purchase a T-1 connection to your office that would provide both phone lines and internet service. The fixed speed of a T-1, which is 1.5 MBPS, seemed sufficient at the time. However, local DSL vendors and local cable internet vendors have begun offering business-class circuits with maximum speeds of up to 6MBPS for less than \$100 per month. Note that they are maximum speeds and the maximums are not always guaranteed. However, the 'bursty' characteristic of internet use by browsing and email will take advantage of the higher bandwidth. Note that we have a client that has no local phone service – they rely solely on their individual cell phones. So, is there any situation in which the GUARANTEED speed of a circuit like a T-1 is recommended? Yes. If you have staff that rely on remote access to your network on a constant basis throughout the day, like a remote office. **Recommendations:** Keep your phone service and internet separate unless you have a specific need for the guaranteed bandwidth. Buy the fastest internet speed you can afford. If you rely on remote access, consider a T-1 or other circuit with a guaranteed upload bandwidth.

Not-ready-for-prime-time player: Wireless

Open any Sunday paper and you will see flyers for stores selling wireless access points, wireless routers, wireless adapter cards, wireless printers, etc. Average cost: \$30 each. It sounds too good to be true....and it is. Based on our experiences over the last year, wireless technology has just not kept up with people's expectations. Wireless networks are great in non-critical locations, like your house, your camp, the coffee shop, your conference room, etc. But when you need a rock-solid connection, use a wire. **Recommendations:** If a network connection can be run, run it. Only use wireless for visitors and the unique situation where you can't run a wire.

Dells latest line of business computers - VOSTRO

In 2008, many customers began asking for Dell's new line of business computers – the Vostro. This line replaced the Dimension line, which had originally been targeted to home users but had been adopted by budget-conscious businesses. We did not like the Dimension line and have generally recommended the Optiplex line, Dell's long-time line of business workstations. We have had fairly good success with Vostros, only encountering a handful of workstations all year that had troubles right off the bat. **Recommendations:** When you are ready to purchase, compare the Vostro price with a similarly-configured Optiplex. If the cost is not too different, go with the Optiplex.

Gigabit Infrastructure - Worth the extra cost

Currently, most offices are wired with a type of network cable capable of speeds of 100(megabit speed.) The current crop of infrastructure hardware, like network cards and switches, support a speed of 1000 (gigabit speed.) In our experience, the difference is noticeable and worth the extra money. Gigabit speed network cards are under \$50, and network switches that support gigabit speeds are only slightly more than slower models. In general we do not recommend replacing existing wiring with new wiring, but if you are building out a new space or renovating, then by all means use the wiring that will handle the faster speeds. **Recommendations:** Replace your network switch and all network cards with gigabit speed devices. (You should see a difference, even using existing wiring.) Make sure all new hardware purchases and wiring services capable of gigabit speeds.

ADMINISTRATION

What's in a Name? Domain Names

We registered a record number of new domain names for our clients last year. Some people were still using the 'free' email addresses provided by their ISP (Internet Service Provider,) which is not a good idea because you may want to change ISPs at some point. Some clients were still using free email accounts like HOTMAIL or GMAIL for their business email, which in my opinion, is not very professional. Some clients had their domain names registered with 'second-tier' companies like Godaddy, Tucows, and register.com. We have found that these companies use aggressive sales tactics and in some cases have been unpleasant to work with.

Recommendations: Stop using AOL, AT&T, Gmail, HOTMAIL and other free or consumer accounts for your business email. Get your own domain name for your business and set up email addresses to use. Get control of your own domain name – don't let your vendor or ISP be the only one with access to your domain name. Register your domain with Network Solutions - they are the 'top dog' in the domain name world.

Procedures – Saving Money through Documentation

We saved our clients a lot of money in 2008 by developing and using procedures. We have procedures for adding users to the network, adding workstations to the network, handling data and email when an employees are terminated, etc. Clients that utilized our forms and procedures saved time and money on these 'routine' services. **Recommendations:** Create and utilize procedures whenever possible. Insist that your vendors have their own procedures and follow them any time you can. Having procedures streamlines operations, saves time, and reduces costs.

Utilizing the resources of your technology service provider

Whenever there is an economic downturn, people try to save money by trying to handle their own technology issues. In 2008, we spent a great deal of time fixing and undoing things that clients tried to do themselves. From setting up PDA synchronization to installing software to purchasing their own equipment, we saw it all last year. In most cases, *we spent more time fixing the problem than we would have spent doing it right the first time!* In one extremely annoying situation, a client purchased his own workstation and it somehow got tagged as an 'out-of-the country' purchase. Now, the vendor cannot locate the record of the purchase and we cannot get support on the workstation. In the end, these kinds of situations always cost the client more money. **Recommendations:** Find a technology service provider that has the heart of a teacher and learn as much as you can from them. Make sure they proceduralize processes that you are capable of doing yourself and that you want to do yourself. Balance the time you spend handling your own tech issues versus the time you spend making money.

2008 Mississippi Bar Survey

In 2008, the Mississippi Bar released its annual survey, which contained survey information related to technology spending from 2007. Here are some highlights of interest:

The average firm spent \$38,000 on technology. This is surprising in that 69% of the respondents were firms of 2-3 attorneys or smaller. This number seems unusually high for an 'average' year and probably reflects a time period when many firms replaced equipment or implemented new systems.

The top categories of PC usage were for word processing, legal research, bookkeeping, billing, calendaring, database, and case management. In my experience, most attorneys and law firm spend a high percentage of their time dealing with email. Email was not listed as a separate category and may have been included in the 'case management' category.

Only 14% of respondents scan "everything." This is probably accurate, but as more firms purchase desktop scanners and implement practice management systems, I expect this number to increase dramatically.

Only 28.8 % of respondents use case management software. I see this number increasing as mid-sized firms strive to become more efficient. Numbers will also increase if we enter another period where big firms break up into smaller firms. The smaller firms will be more likely to hit the ground running with the proper infrastructure, which should include case management software.

Almost 48% of respondents use no time and billing software. Most plaintiff firms I have worked with do not track their time unless they have taken on some hourly-billing cases. As more firms switch to fixed-fee and 'value billing,' this number may decrease. However, there will always be those conscientious firms that wish to analyze performance and productivity and will therefore ALWAYS be interested in tracking time – even if they will not bill for it.

Practice Management News

As many of you know, I have been using Time Matters in my business for 10 years and became a Certified Independent Consultant in 2001. In 2004, Lexis Nexis purchased the Time Matters family of products. Since then I have worked closely with the Lexis management and sales teams to sell, service and support these practice management solutions throughout Mississippi. As a result, I am more 'in tune' with the Lexis family of products than I am with other product lines.

In 2008, Lexis sales reps began marketing Lexis' line of practice management software packages, which include Time Matters, Billing Matters, PCLaw, HotDocs and CaseMAP. Ed Rice and Mike Dorgan did a great job of introducing many new firms to this suite of products. At year's end, Lexis had created a new sales division specifically for these products.

The Time Matters/Billing Matters combination was in my opinion the best integrated practice management system available. However, in 2008 Lexis announced that Billing Matters would be phased out in favor of PCLaw. Lexis is replacing Billing Matters with PCLaw, the market share leader in legal billing/accounting software. At present, the ‘linking’ between Time Matters and PCLaw is adequate. However, my hope is that eventually the development teams of the two programs will come together and Lexis will once again offer a truly integrated complete system.

Westlaw’s PROLaw practice management system is still perceived as a system for larger firms – in fact it did not show up at all in the MS Bar survey. We know of several firms using PROLaw, but they are mostly larger firms.

Recommendations: Time Matters is a comprehensive case management package that helps you manage documents, calendars, contacts, matters, email, notes, phone messages, and time tracking. Combined with PCLaw for billing and accounting, these programs make the best legal practice management system available.

Renewed interest in web sites

In 2008, there was a renewed interest in upgrading firm web sites. Many firms with ‘static’ web sites invested in new ‘active’ web sites. Some outfits like Findlaw and Justia specialize in designing law firm web sites and provide services that include active updating of web site content, active promotion of the web site in popular search engines, and even places for blogs and easily-updatable content. Other companies will design your website and then coordinate the marketing of the site through advertising programs from Google and other on-line search engine marketing companies. **Recommendations:** Look for some web sites that you like and find out who designed them. (On the bottom of most home pages, look for a “Powered by...” or “Site designed by...” link.) Prices for a redesign of a static web site range from \$3,000 to \$10,000. Average prices for active search-engine marketing can range from \$500/month to \$5,000/month.

The best marketing tools....

According to a legal seminar I attended last year, many firms throw their entire marketing budget into their website. However, based on information presented at the seminar, the #1 marketing method for attracting new clients was, believe it or not, SEMINARS. In-person seminars were productive as well as on-line seminars, or WEBINARS. The service offered by GOTOMEETING.COM is very popular and is an inexpensive way to host a webinar for clients or prospects. **Recommendation:** Learn how to present webinars and consider using them as an inexpensive way reach out to existing clients and prospects. The cost for unlimited webinars of 10 attendees or less is around \$50 per month.

ASPs may not be the best choice for some law firms

We know of several law firms that have outsourced their entire network infrastructure to application service providers (ASPs.) In general, we have found this to not be a good match. While some aspects are ideal, like being able to avoid the initial purchase of servers and software, other aspects, including implementing basic functions like scanning to your desktop, can be clumsy and problematic. While most ASPs are geared towards providing access to popular Microsoft applications, many law firms use heavy-duty, legal-specific applications like practice management, document management, and litigation support systems. Maintaining these systems often requires specific expertise, and ASP staff are not likely to have that expertise.

Recommendation: Before outsourcing everything, talk with other law firms that have done it. Make sure you understand how your day-to-day functions are accomplished within the framework of the ASP before making a commitment.

Vista + Wordperfect = ?

In late 2007, the combination of WordPerfect on a Windows Vista workstations was a disaster. However, in 2008, new releases for both products were released. For all practical purposes, the programs work well together. **Recommendation:** Keep current with WordPerfect releases to ensure compatibility with the latest products from Microsoft.

The case for Timeslips

I was a big fan of Timeslips back in the 1990's. It was the market leader in legal time and billing software and was a truly awesome product. I used it in my business and sold and supported the product throughout Mississippi. Around the year 2000, they introduced Version 9, a really buggy version that alienated many clients. Version 10.5 was released shortly thereafter and has been a real winner. In fact, I'll bet that most of the survey respondents that reported using Timeslips (10.5%) still use an older version of Timeslips.

So what's happened lately with Timeslips? Not much. And there's the rub. There were attempts to marry it to a 'front-office' case management product and to a 'back-office' accounting system. Well, they never quite worked out. Yes, it integrates with QuickBooks and Outlook, but that combination still does not provide a 'complete' practice management solution. Every year or so a new revision comes out, but there have been no useful improvements to the program in years. In fact, some of our clients installed newer versions but have since sent them back, continuing to use the older versions. So, the older versions work great and the new versions are just OK.

Recommendations: If you use Timeslips and it is working for you, stick with it. If you need a new time-billing solution and nothing else, it will work for you. However, if you are looking for a comprehensive practice management solution, then Timeslips will probably not be a part of it.

Do Cost-Capture systems really save you money?

Ten years ago, many firms were implementing systems to track copier usage and long-distance phone calls so that they could be billed back to the client. In general these systems were terrible - complicated to operate, difficult to integrate with billing systems, and expensive. However, it was somewhat 'convenient' to track usage in that there was ONE firm-wide long distance service and in most cases ONE centralized photocopier. Now long-distance calls are made from the office or from a firm cell phone, where the charges for these calls are likely to be included in a package deal or flat-rate monthly service. Desktop scanners and printers are spread throughout offices and are replacing the need for photocopiers, especially for small jobs. This decentralization has made it impractical to implement traditional cost-capture systems.

Recommendations: Do not invest in a cost-capture system until a new technology emerges that can accommodate cell phones, desktop scanners and desktop printers. Consider negotiating an administrative fee (1-3%) to cover the cost of photocopies, scans, printouts, etc. Outsource large photocopying jobs – a client may be more likely to reimburse you for an 'outside' job than for an 'inside' job.

How to choose a Technology Partner

Choosing the right company to partner with can be the difference between having a positive technology experience and living a life of “technology uncertainty.” Here are some things to look for in a technology partner:

Make sure they have the ‘heart of a teacher.’

Providing the best support does not just mean having the ability to fix your problems. The best consultants can communicate technical issues to you and your staff in an understandable fashion, helping you make the best decisions for your company. Look for companies that provide free training and awareness sessions for you and your staff. Chances are that these same companies will have earned multiple industry certifications and will have some ongoing education program for themselves.

Avoid firms whose primary business is to seek large contact awards.

Some companies take on service and support engagements to tide themselves over in between the ‘big scores’ of contract work. These companies are probably not interested in the long-term well-being of your business, and therefore have not developed the necessary processes to provide the most efficient support.

Watch out for firms with large overhead, sales quotas, and bloated management structure.

Do they use the products and services that they sell? You are looking for a real partner here, and sales quotas and fat commissions can create a conflict-of-interest situation.

Look for firms with the best processes and procedures.

Combined with good documentation, processes and procedures can save time, reduce errors, and provide for the best overall service. Look for companies that have gone down this ‘path’ and that have systems in-place. As much as you can, plug into their processes and take advantage of their standardization.

Look for companies with broad backgrounds.

First and foremost, your technology partner should be a ‘technical guru.’ But over the long run, having access to consultants a wider range of skills could be more helpful to you. Software development skills are useful in helping with spreadsheet formulas and macro programming. An engineering background can be helpful when analyzing new system requirements and when integrating new systems. Accounting and business knowledge can be helpful when evaluating new practice management or workflow systems. In general, people with the broadest backgrounds can make the best consultants.

Look for a company with the right attitude.

If they have a ‘can-do’ attitude, they will never say no to helping you solve a problem. They will either solve it themselves or make sure they find someone to solve it.

Now is the time to begin investigating and evaluating the best technology match for your business. Choosing the right partner can increase your efficiency, save you money, and help your business succeed.

About Matrix Solutions, Inc.

Matrix Solutions, Inc., was founded in 1992 to provide technology services to Mississippi businesses. We offer on-site service and support, software development, training, and consulting services.

We provide desktop application support, server support, and support for specialized applications like Time Matters, PCLaw, and Timeslips. We also support our clients' use of industry-specific management systems in the medical, insurance, and legal fields.

Our staff consists of technical support personnel, an office manager, and an intern. Our technical support staff all have college degrees and maintain certifications with industry leaders such as Microsoft, Cisco, and LexisNexis. Our technical staff are responsible for overseeing our client relationships – we have no sales staff. Our office manager maintains all licensing and subscription information and processes client backup tapes. Our intern position was created to perform supervised, routine PC repair work at a low hourly rate.

We run our business using Time Matters for practice management with Billing Matters for billing and accounting. Payroll is outsourced to ADP. We use Blackberry PDAs sync'd to Time Matters. We use Postini SPAM filtering and have an Exchange Server for our mail, with matter-related mail ultimately being saved into Time Matters. Our infrastructure consists of Dell-brand workstations, laptops and servers. Our wiring, switches and network cards are all rated at GigaBit speeds. We have a SnapGear firewall with redundant internet connections – cable and DSL. We use remote backup services from MozyPro, have Katrina drives on our servers, and use an LTO 400/800 tape backup system to backup our data. We are a 'paper-less' office and scan all documents with our Fujitsu desktop scanners. We use Symantec products for backup and anti-virus. **In short, we use the products that we sell and support.**

We have developed a 3-stage process for working with new clients.

Stage 1: Our BizNet™ Discovery Process consists of an audit of your current systems as well as a business interview with key office personnel. From this we prepare SuperDOC™ Network Documentation Package and a BizNet™ Technology Analysis.

Stage 2: With our BizNet™ Baseline Achiever, we help you implement industry-standard solutions to bring your network up to a stable, maintainable state.

Stage 3: With our Proactive Network Monitoring, Routine Server and Workstation Maintenance, and ON-Site Service and Support, we keep your network running smoothly, so you can concentrate on running your business. Free quarterly TechAware™ training/awareness seminars help keep you and your staff updated on technology issues. Periodic planning and review sessions with office management are free of charge.

Our office is located in the Reservoir area of Brandon near Grants Ferry Road. Visitors are welcome to stop by at any time.

If you would like to meet with us to review our services, please visit our website at www.matrixsolutions.com or call us at 601-992-6789.