



Benefits of Using an Immigration Case Management Database

By Jeff Chenoweth, Director of Center for Citizenship and Immigrant Communities, Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. (CLINIC)

Introduction

An immigration case management database is an essential tool for immigration legal representatives, including those practicing in a nonprofit agency. This is true for day-to-day duties and the ever-changing nature of practicing immigration law with increasing demand for services, rising caseloads, diversifying case types and case complexities. The ever-looming possibilities of large-scale immigration changes made by different presidential administrations and Congress adds to the necessity for use of a database.

Too many nonprofit-based immigration legal representatives, including attorneys, do not use a database. Reasons may include cost, habit or avoidance of technology. In this situation, a representative downloads immigration forms from federal government websites and puts a little or a lot of client data in a spreadsheet. While somewhat common, this method of case management is far from ideal and may lead to human error and legal liability, if not also information overload and burnout.

Other representatives may minimally use a database because of its inadequacies. Within the same legal practice, there may be varying degrees of use of a database with one representative only using for basic forms completion to a colleague designing multiple reports and drop-down options for quick data. Inconsistent use within the same agency is also not ideal. It minimizes the value of data management, raises questions about the paying the cost for the database and leaves the next legal representative challenged in picking up another person's caseload.

Questions to Assess the Need for a New or Different Database

Managers of immigration legal services might ask the following questions when assessing its program use of information technology and client databases:

1. Are we keeping up with industry standards in managing client data? What can we learn from different agencies that we respect also providing similar immigration legal services?

2. Are we exposed to greater legal liability than necessary because of how we manage data?
3. Are we collecting and storing all the client data we need to effectively provide high-quality legal representation? Are staff able to rest easy on and off the job knowing what their duties are to each client and deadlines ahead?
4. Are we collecting and storing all the programmatic data we need to effectively tell successful stories about our services and thereby draw support from our agency's leadership, funders and community stakeholders? Or are we spending valuable legal representatives' time manually collecting and counting data for reports?
5. Is the lack of a database, or the one we currently use, limiting our ability to grow, diversify our services and thereby minimize our efforts in pursuing our nonprofit's mission statement?
6. Does our agency leadership support my staff's choice of a database and the business model we prefer to pay for it on an ongoing basis whether through client legal service fees, grants, donations or a combination of these methods?
7. What are the realistic dates by which we can: make a database choice; sign a contract; migrate our existing data; get staff adequately trained; and begin using one database consistently going forward?

Advice in How to Choose a Right Database

Each year there seems to be an increase in the number and characteristics of immigration legal databases on the market. Many options can make for difficult decision-making whether purchasing for the first-time or making a change. Here is some advice on how to choose the right database for your program.

- Do not go with what is the "easy" choice — Some choose to hire a database designer and create a proprietary system either as a stand-alone design or one tacked onto the agency's overall client database. Databases on a nonprofit's server often lack the security protections or firewalls that corporations do to protect client's personal identifying information. A proprietary system rarely works to anyone's satisfaction in the long run and leaves the users without easy solutions to improve the system in the future.

- Make sure that you understand what industry standards are — A good immigration case management database can be one of the most important investments made for an immigration legal program’s future. The decision to purchase and use a case management database should not be based on personal preferences. Rather the decision should be based on industry standards. It is important for a program manager to have a vision for the maximum use of a database. To that end, it is helpful for the decision-maker to know what different products on the market can do, with what ease and under what business terms. Here are some features that a good case management database should include based on current industry standards:
 - Form filling features (auto population of data)
 - Case management features (tracking cases, case notes, calendaring)
 - Billing and accounting processes
 - Standard and customized reports
 - Client portal for easy access and response
 - Secured data storage of files and documents

- Consider the present and anticipated needs of the program in this virtual world — More immigration legal representation is done virtually, whether by choice or out of necessity, than when web-based case management systems were first introduced. Users of web-based databases know the many benefits above a stand-alone system that sits only on an agency’s server. A web-based system provides greater mobility, allowing case files to be accessed by users anywhere there is access to the internet. Staff and volunteers have flexibility in where they work. This assists in serving clients living in rural communities, including farmworkers. Files can be accessed by the legal supervisor for quality review and support rather than carrying hard copy files away from the protection of the office.

Web-based systems are useful in bringing legal services to immigrants in community settings where group application workshops are held. Legal experts can be drawn from great distances to participate in workshops for quality control roles.

Web-based platforms with embedded texting capabilities aid in communicating with clients who don’t have, or don’t frequently use, an email address — reducing the number of “no shows” for appointments and the number of phone calls to the receptionist. Clients comfortable using digital communication can participate in their own case in a web-based system by using client-assigned portals with passcodes to open their online file and enter data, thereby limiting the typing done by legal representatives. Lastly, benefits extend to serving large numbers of clients who can benefit from any immigration reform laws or administrative actions.

- Research the experiences of peers using other databases — Decision-makers should interview other nonprofit immigration legal programs about what they use, how they use it and why they stay with their choice.
- Consider cost and financial support for sustainability — The decision should not be based on cost alone. Too many nonprofits have simply bought the cheapest system without considering its overall functionality and ability to adapt for the future. Such decision-makers realize later they have been “penny wise and a pound foolish.”

Questions to Ask Vendors Before Making a Database Selection

Here are some questions program managers may ask vendors before making a database selection. You can also use these questions to ask peers about their databases.

1. How long has the immigration legal database been on the market? What other forms of legal services does it support such as family and criminal law?
2. What is the customer profile using the database? Is it mostly for-profit attorneys in large law firms or private practitioners? What percent are nonprofit users carrying similar humanitarian and family-based caseloads? May I randomly choose to speak some of the customers?
3. How can potential customers see a demonstration of the database? How in-depth is the demonstration? How frequently can we see it demonstrated and for how long?
4. What is the pricing model to use the database? Is it a flat-rate or based on variables such as volume of cases, number of users each month/year or frequency of using specific features?
5. How will existing client, and possibly program data, be migrated from the current database to another and what, if any, additional cost is involved? What quality control methods are used to ensure no data is missing or scrambled in the migration process?
6. What is in a standard contract? What is the length of the contract?
7. What is the guaranteed speed by which all forms are updated based on changes made by the government agency issuing the immigration benefit? How are database engineers trained to understand the immigration law behind the forms and functions they create?
8. What are the methods by which customers access training and technical support, the cost factors and guarantees to access both? What is the frequency of training and what method(s) are used? What are the contractually-based technical support services offered to customers?

9. What is the method and cost by which the database can be modified for our unique purposes?

Benefits to Using an Immigration Case Management Database

There are many specific benefits to using an immigration case management database. Below is a list of the many benefits to consider. Quality systems provide:

1. Uniform case management approaches that eliminate idiosyncratic, and often less-than-professional, ways that different staff members enter client data and complete immigration forms.
2. A central location for case data and case notes.
3. Up-to-date federal immigration forms within 24 hours of issuance, thereby eliminating the possibility of filing with an out-of-date form, which can be a form of legal malpractice.
4. Forms that can be completed electronically and automatically upload common data between forms for the same client, thereby eliminating multiple entries and possible data entry errors.
5. Back-up of hardcopy data in electronic form, which is less vulnerable to damage or destruction, in addition to permanent storage of data after a case file is closed and destroyed at the authorized time.
6. A reminder, or "tickler" system to help legal representatives keep track of filing deadlines and appointments, again, helping avoid a legal malpractice situation due to human error.
7. Queries to identify on-the-spot critical caseload information such as the number of cases opened and closed; type of service completed in a month; and client demographics by nationality, age, income, and other data points.
8. Report forms to log queries into permanent records for data sharing and analysis necessary for the parent agency's overall needs — data that can be available indefinitely for future reports covering long periods of time.
9. Mail merges generated from client files so that legal representatives can automatically inform clients in a letter about a new immigration benefit or a particular deadline to file a form, saving hours of work.
10. E-filing of completed forms to federal agencies processing immigration forms.

11. Easier access for supervisors in monitoring their staff's caseload and cases, thereby spot-checking weaknesses in their staff's performance and identifying changes that will better serve clients; and
12. Financial record keeping tracking client payments and assist in analyzing program revenue and expenses.

Any quality product on the market should have the features described above. However, it is important to note some differences in products when making a choice. Most important is the difference in training and technical support on an ongoing basis. Ensure your preferred vendor provides on-site and virtual training in addition to phone and email technical assistance to use its system.