



# The Client Side *Evolution* of Law Firm *Collaboration*

How Law Firms Will Create  
Client Portals That Enable Better  
Collaboration and Transparency

A LEGAL BUSINESS REPORT BY ADERANT



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Imagine a scenario where a law firm is able to provide every client with a secure portal to share documents, data, and expertise in real time. Think what that would do for the relationship with your clients – addressing the transparency and collaboration they have been demanding in recent years.

The concept of a client collaboration technology (or client portal) is not new, but traditionally these have been expensive and difficult to deploy. That's all beginning to change as a consequence of several trends inside and outside the legal community that have begun to intersect:

First, access to information in business-to-consumer markets has raised expectations for business-to-business organizations such as law firms. Consumers have grown accustomed to checking on the status of their accounts with a business anytime they wish. That expectation is putting pressure on businesses that serve other businesses to do the same.

Second, advancement in technology provide better features, predictable costs, scalability, and stronger security.

Finally, the pressure clients have placed on firms for greater transparency and efficiency continues. Client portals go a long way toward meeting this need.

This legal business report will address each of these concepts in depth and provide perspective on the many tangible ways client portals will enable better collaboration.



# Bringing a Consumer-Grade Portal Experience to Legal

What banks have provided in online access is, in reality, a client portal. It has spilled over into other consumer vertical markets. Where we once received a monthly invoice in the mail, today, we have access to real-time billing information from nearly every service provider we use.

Public utilities provide us with data about our water use and power consumption. Worried about going over the data limit on your mobile phone? Log in to the mobile app and check how much you've used. Online streaming and e-commerce sites offer recommendations based on consumption habits – right alongside reviews, ratings, alternative purchasing options and our order history.

This access to information is an adaptation of knowledge management. It's highly collaborative and has brought greater transparency to our relationship with service providers. Providing customers with an online portal may have been a luxury at one time, but today it's evolved into a basic necessity. Chances are most consumers would not bank with a financial institution that does not provide online access to their accounts.

At Aderant, we have observed this trend is taking root in the business of law. Corporate clients are increasingly asking for portals from their law firms. They see it as a natural progression in the pursuit of closer collaboration and increased transparency.

Would consumers bank with a financial institution that didn't provide online access to their checking or savings accounts?

Consider all the transactions you can conduct simply by logging into an online account or mobile app: checking balances, monitoring interest, transferring funds and paying bills, among others. Years ago, these operations would have required a phone call or trip to a branch office, but today, the ability to execute these online is a consumer expectation.

A bank that does not offer its customers self-serve access online would struggle to be competitive. At the same time, the availability of account status information has raised the bar for excellence in client service. As a result, banks have continued to roll out new features. There are mortgage calculators, tools to analyze your spending habits, and ways to monitor your credit rating, for example.

While these improve the experience for the client, new features also present additional revenue opportunities and may improve client retention. Take the checking account holder that applies for a mortgage after using a free online calculator, for example. The customer experienced a higher level of service that led to additional business for the institution. Even better, that customer now has two accounts, rather than just one, and is less likely to switch banks.



## Technically Possible but at a High Cost

The notion of a client portal isn't new. It is a logical extension of a knowledge management strategy and a way to improve service delivery while strengthening client relationships. Some firms have already deployed client portals, but these tend to be expensive and reserved for only marquee clients.

Traditionally, building a client portal was a massive undertaking that strained law firm resources. It's essentially like running another law firm intranet, but with the polish and customization necessary for a client.

Developing and provisioning a portal required considerable time and technical expertise. It also compelled a sizable investment in on-premises IT infrastructure. Like any site, a client portal grows over time, which needs increasing amounts of processing power and storage space. Even after a portal was rolled out, the maintenance tasks such as updates, security patches and configuration management remained an ongoing process.

In more recent years, cybersecurity fears have added to the expense, both in terms of talent and tools to defend against intrusions. This also introduced a new cultural barrier as clients grew concerned as to how their law firm partners were storing and securing data about their legal matters. There was plenty of risk for law firms since a client portal on on-premise servers meant outside traffic was permitted inside the law firm's firewall.

Some of the larger law firms could afford the luxury of building these for their top clients, however it wasn't scalable or repeatable. No firm could field the resources to deliver tailored portals to dozens, or even hundreds, of different clients and matters.

# Technology Driven by Business of Law Trends

No one wants to call a bank or the power company to check their account balance, so why should a client with a budget question wait for outside counsel to return their call? The legal market has been insisting on greater transparency from law firms. A self-service portal, where they can see the budget status for themselves, is a savvy and efficient way to deliver it.

Client portals are now a reality due to advancements in technology:

## Integration

Law firms have multiple systems and disparate data sources. Knowledge management tools have been effective at integrating these sources into a single screen for law firm intranets, and the cloud will make it available in client portals. Any data in a law firm network that is tied to a matter number – such as matter management, document management, practice management, time and billing, and customer relationship management – is potentially part of a client-facing extranet.

## Customizable

Firms will be able to customize client portals to meet the needs of a specific client by choosing from a library of templates and widgets. This gives the firm the flexibility to select the information sources it wants to share with clients and presents it in a manner best suited for the purpose.

# Easy-to-deploy

Provisioning and deploying a client portal will simply require business analyst-style skills. This means point-and-click and drag-and-drop style functionality where users select sources and deploy the portal. For the end-user, like clients and lawyers, the experience will be intuitive, familiar and mirror the look and feel of commercial social networks and search engines, yet inside a secure and private portal.

# Scale

The simplicity of deployment means building portals is easily scalable. Law firms will be able to provide a portal to all their clients regardless of the size or complexity of their matters.

We have observed, first hand, a law firm use a knowledge management platform to build a portal that streamlined the management of a large class-action suit. A single case had more than 5,000 distinct matters, each with events, research and docketing information that rolled up into a single internal portal.

This is far more efficient than requiring a lawyer to jump from system to system all day long – to access research, court deadlines, and case files. We are suggesting that law firms will soon be able to provide this same capability – at this scale – to their clients.

# No Longer a Luxury

In just a few years, we predict client portals will be ubiquitous in the legal community. Like consumers and banking, corporate clients will have an expectation that they can check in on the progress and status of the matters from budget planning – to a legal outcome. The firms that do not offer client portals will be anomalies. As such, client portals are poised to transform from a luxury item for a select few, to an essential tool for all clients. In the end, law firms stand to benefit through strengthened client relationships and perhaps, new business opportunities.

# 15 New Ways Client Portals Will Enable Better Collaboration

The example of a self-service portal where a client can get an answer to a budget question any time they want is just the beginning of what may become possible. These are highly secure and external knowledge platforms where law firms can collaborate with clients, legal support vendors and even other law firms on every dynamic aspect of a legal matter.

Below are some of the things we believe client portals will enable law firms to do in the near future:

## 1 360-degree client view of a matter.

A complete view of documents, deadline and status of any legal project, matter or case file. Rather than spending time tracking down emails or documents, which are often spread out across systems, virtually any aspect of a case can be found in one place.

Enterprise search provides the ability to quickly find the right information that isn't immediately visible. Machine learning algorithms will begin to understand what a client is looking for and surface contextual relevant documents and information that would have been missed otherwise.

## 2 Collaborative editing.

It's one thing to share a document and pass edits back and forth, but collaborative editing inside a secure portal is more efficient. Importantly, it retains an audit trail so users can see who changed what and when.

## 3 Access to teams.

Rather than going to a firm's website and searching through biographies, clients can log into a portal and see all of the firm's lawyers assigned to their matters along with their contact information. They will also have the ability to trade messages right there in the portal.



## 4 Messaging.

Messaging allows clients and firms to exchange information in near-real-time without having to be available at the same exact moment. In other words, messaging offers the promise of a continuous conversation rather than a missed phone call.

The types of messaging will include instant messaging, threaded comments and perhaps even video conferencing. These communications will be logged and indexed which means they are searchable and auditable.

## 5 Share rich content.

Client portals will offer the ability to share rich media content such as videos, diagrams and images. The functionality will work much like you'd experience on a social network, except it's inside a secure portal and shared only with trusted parties to which the firm has granted access.

## 6 Historical invoices.

How often does a client ask a firm to send (or resend) an invoice? When it happens, a partner delegates the task to an assistant, who sends the request to the billing department. The client gets the invoice in however long it takes for that process to play out.

Client portals will eliminate a lot of this back and forth. Clients will be able to review all of their invoices, including historical invoices, on-demand. They'll see what has been paid and what is pending, and law firms will have the ability to highlight those invoices that are past due.

## 7 Client budget data.

As described earlier, clients can see what work has been billed, what is still in progress, and what is forthcoming. This will also provide analysis tools to estimate future legal costs and accruals – and the means to compare actual billing to a planned budget.

## 8

### Dynamic forms.

Non-technical users – lawyers and allied professionals – will be able to create dynamic forms to collect information in the portal, rather than taking that information over the phone or copying and pasting data from an email. This streamlines data entry and reduces the chances of manual errors.

These could be built for an ad hoc purpose or as part of law firm processes such as client intake. We envision applications in repeatable legal work such as high-volume transactional duties like closing financial transactions, immigration work and insurance defense.

One member of our global leadership team experiences this firsthand. He is a citizen of another country but has direct reports in the U.S. and needs to be able to travel. The law firm that handles this for our business, will call him to obtain the information they need for a visa application. In the future, they can eliminate the phone call and send him a link to a secure portal with a form he can complete at his convenience.

## 9

### Build workflows for process efficiency.

Clients and firms can build workflows for any legal process. For example, it could include a linear sequence for a team that is responsible for reviewing and finalizing a document before it is delivered to a third party. Members will be notified when their next action is due and will also be able to see where in the process any matter may be and better anticipate what needs to happen next.

## 10

### Matter initiation.

A client or law firm will be able to initiate a new matter within the client portal. In turn, that may trigger forms and automated workflows that are part of matter initiation. Here again, we see this as having the most utility in high-volume legal work. Indeed, we have observed firms that can do this today, but it's a resource-intensive exercise that's harder than it should be, while still bearing security risks.

## 11

### Docketing data and deadlines.

Docketing data and deadlines can be integrated on an as-needed basis or as part of a new matter or workflow process being initiated.

## 12 Custom notifications.

Much like apps on your phone alert users to a new message, law firms can configure custom notification features in client portals to alert clients to action items. The notifications can have both a utility and promotional element, which if used creatively and judiciously, may generate additional business. Examples of custom notifications could range from an approaching deadline and next required review in a workflow – to a new service, the firm is offering – or displaying a scoreboard of sorts depicting the number of matters the firm has successfully closed for a client.

## 13 Shared access with multiple parties.

Whether it's working with another law firm or a legal support vendor, law firms will be able to invite people within partner organizations to securely communicate in the portal.

In a previous report titled, [The Next Five Years: Future of Legal Technology](#), we identified a current example of this idea. Two global law firms working together to support their joint client, the in-house legal team for one of the largest international airports in the world, built a collaborative portal that supports decision making.

Many regional or AmLaw 200 firms may look at that example and think it's unattainable. However, in the near future, the ability to spin up a client portal quickly will be easily within grasp. More importantly, the ecosystem working on client matters continues to grow. A common and secure space to collaborate online is crucial to getting the work done efficiently.

## 14 Trend analysis

Over time a client portal will grow into a repository of rich data that can be mined for trends. In the same way a bank may offer an analysis of spending habits, client portals will enable law firms to spot trends. For example, a firm may notice an uptick in labor disputes in one geography or a certain category of IP litigation, which allows them to develop tailor strategies for mitigating the risk.

## 15 Business development.

There's clearly a client communications component to a portal, but the tool itself sends a message: it suggests a firm is focused on using technology to provide both transparency and drive efficiency in legal service delivery. It also enables the ability to cross sell a firm's other services to broaden the footprint within an existing client.



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