

Case Management 101

By Paul Purcell

Having traveled to numerous conferences as the vendor of a case management product, I hear all kinds of stories and get all kinds of questions regarding case and information management. The stories I've heard range from "I take notes on envelopes, napkins, business cards... whatever's available" to "Well, we just spent \$3,000 for this software package..." and everything in between. Judging by the number of people who tell these stories and ask questions, I felt a service I could provide to my fellow private investigators would be to do a short article that would touch on the various "levels of intensity" of case management and give a few guidelines on the office automation and/or software questions. Hopefully, wherever you find yourself on this ladder of case management, I'll give you enough information to take you up a rung or two and enough information to keep you from going higher than you need. In other words, I'll help you improve what you've got and keep you from spending your hard-earned money for things you don't need.

Regardless of the system(s) used, good case management carries with it the goal of increasing efficiency in order to save time and increase your company's profit margin. It also carries the goal of improving your final report, and increasing the accuracy of your invoice. You save time by staying more organized in general, by managing your gathered data more easily, by avoiding scheduling conflicts, by remembering and keeping all your appointments in a timely fashion, and by spending less time generating reports and invoices. You increase your profit margin by including (and not accidentally omitting) all the billing details for your hours and expenses, better utilizing your manpower and labor dollars to do more and get more accomplished, and by the fact that your organized data makes for a better report giving you a better work product.

What are the steps necessary to reach these goals? 1) Plan ahead to ensure that you know everything you need to accomplish and all the data you need to gather. 2) Make sure all the data you gather is recorded with detail and accuracy. 3) Make sure that all the billable hours and expenses involved in gathering this data are accurately documented. 4) Monitor all ongoing cases equally and efficiently. 5) Conduct all client communication in a timely fashion. 6) Accomplish all planned activities and goals in a timely manner. 7) Do all of the above with a professional manner and image so you will receive repeat business and referrals.

After reading the above list you're probably going "Yes.... Annnnnnd??..." Actually you'd be surprised at the number of systems that are not capable of accomplishing all of these steps in a synergistic, comprehensive fashion. When I say "systems" I mean an individual agency's system of how internal office procedures are formulated to improve the quality of field notes and incorporate them with software packages (if used).

There are two very important stages of comprehensive case management. The first and most important of the two is the initial stage of data recording, your field notes. The second stage is as important as the first and it is the final, or repository, stage of data gathering. This is where your data is stored for future recall or utilization; the function of your software package if you use one, and/or your internal office procedures.

Everybody, it seems, is trying to come out with some form of computer-centered case management software. Programs abound that attempt to be the end-all, be-all case management system. This is all well and good, but the best place to start good information management is at the very beginning with the raw data as it's gathered. A good lesson can be learned from your checkbook. You can have the best accounting software package there is to manage your money, but when you're out shopping and writing checks don't you need to record the transactions in an orderly and detailed fashion? You don't write down check numbers and totals on any available scrap of paper do you? Of course not. You use the little register ledger in your checkbook and record all the necessary information in one place as it happens. The same principal applies to case management. Therefore, our first subject here will be the most neglected stage of good case management which is stage one, the "in the field" portion.

The importance of a good hard-copy field note system CANNOT be overstated! When it's time for database entry, WHEN the computer crashes, and IF you get called into court to testify, what's required? Your original notes! Until the day comes when each and every one of us can afford laptops or palm pilots for ourselves and all our employees, what are we going to do in the field? Take handwritten notes! And... the bigger your company, the more complex your cases, the more monstrous your computer data system, and the larger your staff, the more you need a really good in-the-field system in place to organize (and standardize) all your raw data gathering AS IT OCCURS.

Changing the way you take notes in the field is going to be the hardest part of all. It's going to take as much discipline as changing any other bad habit. I know it was really tough for me. Being a guy, I was raised on brown paper bags and crayons! When I starting out as an investigator, I had scraps of paper here, note pads there, sticky notes all over the cover of the file folder... I was a mess! So for those of you who are chronic "scrap paper note takers" here are a couple of ways to improve your field notes.

At the bare-bones minimum do this: Utilize one spiral bound notebook or “folio” notepad as the notebook for a single case. Prep your pad in advance before starting to work on the case. Flip to the back and make the last sheet your client and case page. Write down your client’s contact information, a list of people entitled to information concerning the case, and a short synopsis of what the case entails. Flip back to the front of the pad, leaving a couple of blank sheets to block prying eyes and then make a goals page, or a list of things that need to be accomplished during the course of the case. Here you can also gameplan the sources you need to utilize, the places you need to go, and the people you need to talk to in order to work the case. The following page starts your journal. Get a ruler and make three small columns down the left side of the page for “date”, “time”, and “source”. Make a small column down the right hand side of the page for “dollars” to reflect number of hours worked on any given activity and costs involved. Leave the larger middle column open for basic notes. This becomes your Journal and should be carried with you at ALL times to record ALL actions, their time and date, their results, and all costs and hours involved. At the case’s conclusion, use the blank page right before your client page to record case conclusion activities such as date the final report was sent, invoice dates, date the invoice was paid, etc. (You might even write these down as blanks to be filled in later.) The crucial factors to this and any other improvement you make in your system is to standardize what you do from one case to the next and to make these changes a permanent habit.

For a slightly more professional approach, use a three-ring binder and a 5-tab divider set. Divide the sections as follows: 1) Case Background and Case Goals. 2) Activity and Expenses Journal (with the same kinds of columns as the previous paragraph), including a calendar. 3) A section for copies of gathered data and documentation (interviews, surveillance, public records, etc.). 4) Client Info and Communication (store copies of all case related communications). 5) Case Conclusion Data (copies of reports and invoices, date invoice paid, etc.). Also include a small manila envelope or a “notebook pencil pouch” to hold the tiny incidentals such as business cards, photos, receipts, etc.

To further augment a notebook you create and to help polish your professional image, put your wordprocessor to work. Create forms specific to the type of investigative work you do and specific to your company. Instead of blank paper for your field notes, use your forms. This has numerous advantages. One, depending on the detail and extent of these forms, they’ll act as “checklists” that will prevent you from forgetting to include all applicable information. (This is especially useful if you’ve got new agents on your staff.) Two, it conveys the fact that you are serious about your case work. (Clients especially, are impressed by this kind of organization.) Three, having your case laid out in a “fill-in-the-blank” format saves you time by keeping you organized during data gathering and by keeping you from wasting time searching for information lost within random notes (especially if you’re using your notes for later database entries). And four, if you have a large staff this will standardize what each does in the field and will enhance the professional image of each. As a hidden benefit, you can tailor these forms to the specific type of work you do and to the specific size case you’ll work on a regular basis.

You might want to consider creating these:

1. Client Info / Work Order: Set these up to collect all initial pertinent info about your client and their case. Cover everything from simple name, address, and phone, through a short case synopsis. Keep copies of these by the phone to gather all the info on a prospective client or new case while you’re doing the initial phone consultation or, take them with you when meeting a new client for the first time. Once it’s filled out, keep one copy in the office and place another in your field notes notebook.
2. Pertinent Parties. List all people involved in the case and which side they’re on. List all witnesses, subjects, attorneys, etc. along with all contact information and notes regarding their involvement.
3. Witness Info: You should try to include enough information on these so that a person can be located at a much later date should a case drag on for any great length of time. Be sure to include all the basic name and address info plus DOB, SSN, name-address-phone of a relative, vehicular information, and a short synopsis of their part in the case.
4. Clerical and/or Procedural checklist. Only you know the exact steps you want taken in each and every case worked. Prep these to put in each of your field notebooks so you can make sure you’ve dotted all your “i”s and crossed all your “t”s. Your Procedural Checklist will also make sure you’ve taken all the steps, utilized all the sources, and completed all aspects of the investigation as it relates to your specialty. This is really important when you have agents working under you and you want to make sure they work their investigations like you want them worked.
5. Time and Activity. Make a ledger sheet with column headers of “Who”, “Date”, “Start Time”, “End Time”, “Total Hours”, “Mileage”, “Company Costs”, “Personal Expenses”, and a wide column for “Activity”. Leave space at the bottom to total the figures in each column. Put one of these in each field note folder and require each field agent to report each day’s activity from each case at the end of the workday. (Note: you can prep a time sheet like mentioned here, or you can do a simpler form such as was mentioned earlier under the section dealing with simple notepads. That form only had 4 columns: Date, Time, Activity, and Costs.)

6. Specific Data Forms. You'll definitely want to create fill-in-the-blank forms to record the information specific to your specialty. The forms will need to have space to record all the information you search for in each and every case. This gives the pros a place to record what they know to go after, a checklist to remind the newer agents of what to search for, and a standardized set of notes from which to do database entry back at the office. (We say it often in this article, but the two most important words regarding field notes are "organize" and "standardize".)

Whatever you do, get rid of that manila file folder! Nothing is more disorganized or unprofessional looking to a client (or to anyone for that matter) than a file folder stuffed full of random sheets of paper with pages falling out, covered in sticky notes, and held together with rubber bands! Nothing is more time consuming either than to get back to the office, crank up your computer for your database entries, and then sit and sort through all your scattered notes for the next couple of hours trying to figure out what goes where. Now imagine that after sorting through all that you realize you forgot to look for a particular piece of information! Again, the best change you can make is to standardize your field note procedure and organize your gathered data from the moment the first note is taken. A simple analogy is this: Even though there are tons of accounting software packages, all accountants are familiar with the age-old ledger system as a standardized and organized means of recording their initial figures. Your field note system should do the same for you.

At InfoQuest, a medium sized agency, we use a highly detailed hardcopy field note system* for all of our case work activities. Each agent carries a prepped case file with them when working any case. This makes for good organization and detail during note taking, easy data recall during on-computer data entry, great uniformity when it comes time for file swapping or case review, and the professional appearance of the system itself has gotten us several referral cases. We leave the bulk of our data in the case file folders themselves and we keep those in our filing cabinets (which drastically reduces the amount of time spent on the keyboard). We use a simple phone "rolodex" program to enter clients' names and info, and minor data concerning the case and its players (all of which is searchable by keyword). For invoicing we use a simple invoicing program coupled with a simple Excel file that was created in house. ****(Note: The hardcopy field note system used by InfoQuest is The Case File®. Its detail can be seen at www.thecasefile.com).***

The next half of our case management process involves what happens back at the office with the information you've gathered. The systems and procedures you set in place here should enhance your general business management duties (to include case and agent scheduling), produce complete, accurate, and professional reports, and generate and track invoices and financial transactions. Most importantly though, whatever you use in the office should fit your needs without any shortcomings, without "overkill", and without emptying your wallet. The best way to start building an "automated" office is to start simply, and grow only as much as you need to.

To begin coordinating field activity with office activity you'll need to focus first on the procedural aspects of handling your initial documentation. In other words, you've got to have good office filing procedures. Office filing could take up a book of its own and would be about as interesting as pulling surveillance on a rock. However, I would like to give you a few minor suggestions at this point in the article as we're still making the transition from field notes to office work and we haven't "officially" gotten into software or office automation yet.

Problems arise in the office when files and documentation become intermingled, misplaced, or disorganized. It does no good to create pristine field notes if they're only going to be spindled, folded, mutilated, and lost back at the office. A few simple handling rules will help.

Rule one: Keep a master list in the office of all open cases. It should show the client's name, the case number, start date, retainer amount if any, case completion date, the date the invoice was paid, etc. Accounting ledgers work well for such rosters if you prefer hardcopy to computer. Whatever you do, don't rely on seeing the file itself to track the progress on the case. (Always cross-reference somehow even if most of your work is done on computer.)

Rule two: Keep all documentation associated with a particular case together. Don't separate things like receipts, photos, business cards, etc., as they'll only get lost. Even if you have to use several large binder-folios, try to keep all materials together. You'd be surprised at the number of people who organize by type of material. They put "all video tapes here, all court documents there, all receipts in this basket..." Also, make it a rule that as receipts are gathered in the field they're labeled as to case and purpose.

Rule three: For those of you who've already made a healthy transition into office automation, don't forget to back up your files to disk!! In fact, keep a disk with copies of a case's pertinent computer files tucked away in each case file along with your original notes. For example, everything on your computer relating to the "John Smith" file should be copied on a disk and placed in your filing cabinet in the "John Smith" file.

Enough about clerical work. Let's talk about software for just a bit.

Before even considering software, you need to think about the logistics and procedures of making it a part of your life. As strange as this may sound, you MUST consider whether or not your office automation will save you time or create additional headaches. Will you have an office "secretary" in charge of doing all computer entries, or will each agent be responsible? If each agent is responsible will each of them have equal access to the computer? If not, do they have their own computers? If they have their own computers are they networked or will they have to save their work to disk or email their files to the main office? Think through these potential bottlenecks before investing any money at all into office automation as all of the above will have a bearing on what type of system you buy and how it is implemented.

Your bare minimum should be a good wordprocessor. Most wordprocessors today (those put out in the past 3 to 4 years) have some pretty good database capabilities as well as some limited spreadsheet capacity. In fact, in our office, our wordprocessor is ESO (Equipment Superior to Operator!). The "database" function of most wordprocessors lies in the fact that they'll let you search all your closed files for words or phrases contained in a document or documents. This is useful even if all you do is use your wordprocessor to type reports. Many of the higher priced case management databases tout this capability as one of their better features when actually, it's pretty standard in a LOT of applications! The limited "spreadsheet" function found in most wordprocessors is usually found within the "tables" functions (or the equivalent). Many tables will let you perform a sum function to add figures contained within a specific column of a table. Limited yes, but if all you do is type reports and simple invoices for a moderate number of cases, this will be all you need.

Your next piece of software should be a standard spreadsheet such as Excel or Lotus. Once again, you can work wonders with these pieces of software with just a little bit of tutoring. Even with my entire Excel expertise coming straight from a "Dummies" book (Yours truly swears by the "Dummies" books!) I was able to create an invoicing file that looked very professional and would total all itemized hours and expenses. It would also automatically copy the totals onto a running payroll sheet that would calculate individual agents' pay, tax, and deductions, from up to five open cases at once while simultaneously figuring agency income and profit! Want to know what else you can do with a decent spreadsheet? You can create a phone/address file (master case roster) that's as searchable as any that are sold on the market for that specific purpose. Spreadsheet files actually make pretty extensive databases in and of themselves and are really easy to work with once you're used to the software (or "mousebroken" as I like to call it.)

Let's stop here for an important message: If you run a small to medium firm, or if you run a large firm that operates out of one office with a limited administrative staff, you can get by rather well with only the things I've already mentioned. If you keep yourself and your staff organized in the field, if you use simple computer tools to their fullest potential, and if you maintain good office organization, there is NO need to waste hundreds of dollars on "sophisticated" case management software packages! (Also, if you take good field notes, there's no reason to input everything all over again into your software. Decide which data is "key information" that should go in your database, and leave the rest in your notes. This way you'll reduce your valuable keyboard time.)

Let's go up a link or two on the computer "food chain". Next in terms of difficulty, but not price, are the "specialty" information managers that come pre-packaged on a lot of computers. As an example I'll use Microsoft's "Access" and "Outlook". Outlook is a bit simpler to use than Access and a little less powerful, but both can serve a similar function. Both will let you create some rather extensive databases. "Outlook" acts more like a pre-packaged phone / address program but it is flexible and it will let you search by a large number of criteria. It also has some pretty good time and appointment scheduling capabilities. "Access" is fairly complicated, but it will let you create an extensive, fully customizable database that has some rather sophisticated spreadsheet functions. As such, you can set it up with search parameters based on your personal preferences. You can place a priority on case scheduling, unpaid invoices, grouping by types of cases, etc. Note: If you have Access and Outlook, you more than likely will have Microsoft's "Money" as well. "Money" is a good accounting package that will give you a great foundation for a more extensive and detailed invoicing system.

In the same vein, "Sidekick99" is an excellent phone / address / calendar program that sells for well under \$100. It lets you create your own address book templates and it's searchable by any of the categories of information you include in your template. Other similar products are produced by the Rolodex company and by the "My Software" company. Most of these are very economical, very user friendly, and are available at office or computer supply stores.

Now, if you'd rather go buy something that works as one integrated package rather than spend the time to learn all the functions of your existing software, or in creating your own data files, then lets take a look at a couple of intermediate and "generic" products.

"Quickbooks Pro" by Quicken is an excellent price / value if your primary needs center on time and billing. Built around an invoicing system, Quickbooks Pro will also track quite a bit of case information and will cross reference things like expenses and incomes with the cases worked and individual agents' hours. It will also track retainers, taxes, payroll, etc., and will produce charts, graphs, and reports based on any parameters you decide to give it. "Quickbooks Pro" is

rather economical and is available at pretty much any office or computer supply store. It also comes in a stand-alone or network version.

If your primary needs center on scheduling and prospect management, you might want to consider a product called "Act!". "Act!" is a "higher octane" version of "Outlook" and does quite a good job of managing all your calendar, open case, and prospective client contacts, as well as all the pertinent info associated with each. Even though I regard it as a bit pricey, "Act!" can be found for under \$200.

If you decide to progress above and beyond what I've mentioned, let me give you my personal feelings on what to look for in a good, integrated, case management software package (without naming names!):

1. Make sure the package places its emphasis on the same factors you do. For example, if invoice management is your biggest priority, make sure it's also the main priority of the package.
2. Objectively look to see if the marketing materials for the package contain a long list of useless features. Compare its listed capabilities to the simple capabilities of wordprocessors and spreadsheets listed above. If it won't do more than they'll do then save your money! (Make sure it's not a sheep in wolf's clothing!)
3. See when the last "upgrade" was. You don't want to buy something that becomes obsolete every other month. Also, see how much upgrades are.
4. Make sure the system requirements are well within the capabilities of your computer. I've got a couple of cool gadgets sitting here in my office that I won't be able to use until I upgrade my computer.
5. Objectively assess the specific income changes this software will make in your bottom line and make sure the entire price of the package can be recouped in six months or less!! (Preferably far less!)
6. Make sure there are no hidden or excessive "additional terminal", maintenance, or automatic upgrade features in the price. I've seen some systems go for \$5,000 PLUS a \$1,000 networking fee, PLUS a \$100 per month, per terminal maintenance fee! Ridiculous!! (Several good packages are available in their entirety for under \$300!)
7. How complete is the system? Does it provide everything you need or will you need to accessorize? (When you buy a car you also have to consider taxes, maintenance, gas, insurance, etc.)
8. When evaluating the price, include the costs of any downtime you'll experience as a result of procedural changes in your office, or training time for the new software. Also consider any extra hardware needs.
9. Make sure the package can grow at the same rate your agency is projected to. For instance, if you're a solo office now and you're planning on opening a branch office in 6 months, be sure the package can be networked. Also, make sure it can handle the projected volume of your agency. If you do 2,000 cases a year, and the software will only handle 3,000 files total....
10. See how customizable and user-friendly the system is. You want the software to conform to your needs, not the other way around. You also want all its intended users to be able to use it.
11. Finally, tech support. Number one, make sure you don't get charged for it, and two, make sure it's always available 24/7. Murphy's law says you'll need help late Sunday night when you've got a Monday morning report deadline!

Another important note: No matter how high up the software ladder you climb, don't forgo having a really strong in-the-field system in place to record and organize all of your raw data as it's gathered. It's the only thing that will help you utilize your computer to its fullest potential regardless of the software you use, and you only get one chance to make a good first impression. Always remember; "garbage in, garbage out!"

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