

Online Collaboration Tools: Smarter Ways to Work Together

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Collaboration has always been a necessary aspect of a lawyer's practice. Every day, lawyers must work with clients, colleagues and even opposing counsel as a matter of course. In the past, the telephone, fax machine and face-to-face meetings were the primary ways in which lawyers worked with others.

With the rise of the Internet as a communication tool, lawyers now have a number of new and intriguing methods to collaborate with others and become more productive in the process. This column will discuss a few of the latest tools lawyers can use to work smarter, not harder -- together.

Working on Documents Online. When a lawyer wants to work on a document with other professionals, many will attach a document to an e-mail, send it to multiple people, and await the edits. Several online document sites make it easy for a group to work on the same document at the same time. For example, Google Docs (<http://docs.google.com>) allows the creation and sharing of simple documents, spreadsheets, and even presentations, so others can view or edit them online. When everyone finishes with the document, it can be saved as a Word or PDF file. For security reasons, the user might not want to keep these documents online for long periods of time, but services like Google Docs are terrific ways to work on documents with others.

Simple Screen Sharing. Sometimes a lawyer might need to work on a document or other file with another person, but in real time. In this scenario, using a screen-sharing program for an online meeting might be useful. My favorite free option is CrossLoop (<http://www.crossloop.com>), but it can only be used by two people at a time. Each user must install the program on his or her computer; then one person requests access to the other's screen. After access is granted, the user can see everything that happens on that person's computer -- documents, drawings, images, etc. -- and can even control that person's computer. A more advanced (but not free) screen-sharing program is Adobe Connect (<http://www.adobe.com/products/connect>), which allows larger groups to participate in an online meeting or presentation.

Project Management. A number of project management sites have appeared on the Internet that makes it simple to manage teams on cases, transactions or other projects. One such tool is Basecamp (<http://www.basecamp.com>), which provides various levels of service and online storage for between \$12 and \$149 a month. Basecamp's features include file storage, message boards, to-do lists, and other collaboration tools. Many solo and small firm lawyers have started to use Basecamp as a client "extranet" where clients can have their own dedicated Basecamp page to view case files, ask questions, or keep track of deadlines. This is a great way to work with clients online at a relatively low cost.

Wikis. A wiki is, simply, a Web page that can be easily edited by anyone. The most famous example is Wikipedia (<http://www.wikipedia.org>), the encyclopedia that anyone can edit. Wikis have tremendous potential for lawyers who want to collaborate with their clients and others. For example, a lawyer can create a wiki for trial strategy and preparation, an online manual of employee policies and procedures, or a simple directory of resources in a particular subject area. To learn more about wikis and whether this resource might be right for you, visit WikiMatrix (<http://www.wikimatrix.org>), a site that assists in determining which wiki best suits your needs.

File Sharing. It seems that the electronic files we use in our daily work keep getting bigger and bigger. Whether they are PDF e-briefs or transaction documents, the size of these files is often more than our mail servers can handle. A number of sites now make it much easier to send large files to others. One of the oldest, best-known sites is YouSendIt (<http://www.yousendit.com>), which allows users to send a document up to 100MB for free. Simply upload a file to the YouSendIt site, and an e-mail with a download link to the file is sent to the recipient. YouSendIt also offers subscription plans if you want to send larger files. Another current favorite of mine is drop.io (<http://drop.io>). With this resource, you can create an online “exchange” site to “drop” multiple files (up to 100MB). Then simply send the URL of the site to the recipients, and they can download the files at their leisure (the site can stay “live” for up to one year).

These Web resources all have one thing in common: They can help lawyers use the Internet to collaborate with anybody, no matter where in the world they happen to be. You owe it to your practice to implement one or more of these tools in the way you work. They can help you be more productive and efficient, which your clients will certainly appreciate.