

Court Technology

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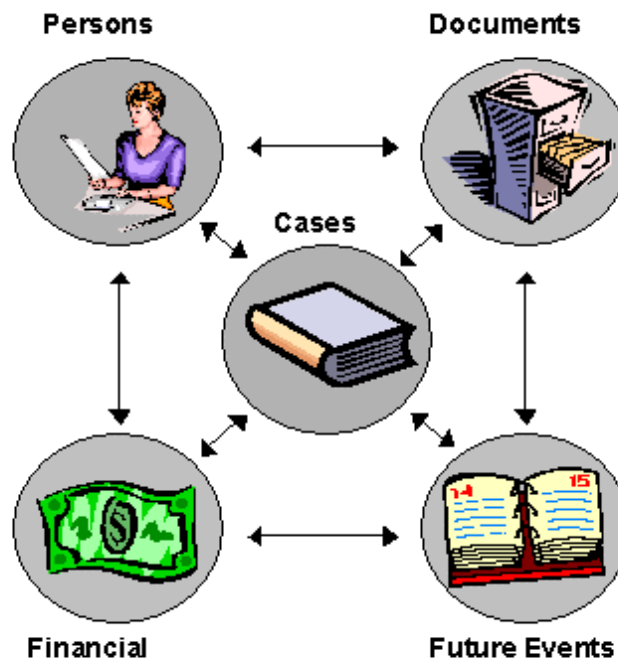
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The Fifth Bubble

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In 1995, I wrote a series of articles for the *Court Technology Bulletin* on a conceptual "four-bubble" model of automated court case management systems. These articles were compiled and are available on the Court Technology Lab Web site at <http://ctl.nesc.dni.us>. The articles were also published in book form as a section of *Caseflow Management: The Heart of Court Management in the New Millennium*, available from The National Center.

The model describes four basic database functional areas (bubbles) in automated court case management systems. First, there is information about persons (also including all "legal person" entities); second, event information regarding case history; third, data about future scheduled events; and fourth, financial event tracking. The basic premise of the entire model is a many-to-many relationship between all of these four functions. In other words, there are many persons, who are related to many cases, who have many financial obligations, with many future scheduled events such as payments. The bottom line was that an automated court case management system is a difficult thing to create, operate, and manage.



I have bad news for those of you wishing for a simpler time. It's going to get worse. An unstated premise was that the programs and data storage for the four elements in a case management system were all that could be handled by a computer system. Realize that the original model was conceived in 1988 when 250 megabyte (millions) disk drives cost about \$15,000. Computer disk space was both very precious and obviously very

expensive. That premise has now changed. As many of you already know, computer disk storage costs have plummeted in recent years. It is not uncommon for PCs to come with 30 gigabytes (billions) of storage. Let me put this into perspective. Last year I visited a medium sized city in New England with three general jurisdiction judges. I went to their file room and calculated that one could scan all of the documents into 24 gigabytes of storage. I have repeated this same scenario many times this past year. I even calculated that the yearly storage requirements for all the general jurisdiction courts in a large eastern state would be less than 350 gigabytes. One can buy 500 gigabytes of storage for less than \$10,000, and the costs are continuing to drop. Bottom line number two: documents can now be stored much cheaper electronically than in courthouses.

So, the new fifth bubble in the case management model is documents. Thus, we have many persons with many documents; who are related to many cases with many documents; who are in turn related to many scheduled events such as hearings; who are related to many documents.

What does this mean for courts? First, I think it means that in the constant struggle for scarce governmental resources such as physical space in courthouses, electronic storage is so much cheaper than the alternative that there is no argument except when and how to do the conversion. Second, it means that mandatory E-filing for lawyers and other professionals who commonly work with the judiciary comes closer to reality because of the cost savings in both storage and staffing. And third, it means that court case management systems must now be able to effectively define, manage, route, and process electronic documents as an integral part of their functionality. These systems must also be designed to be secure. As the recent terrible events have demonstrated, electronic backup systems are mandatory. Systems must be located in multiple locations. For state courts, I would venture to say that all electronic records should be maintained at both the local court and at, for example, the state capitol. This also means that these systems have to securely communicate and exchange data and documents with other systems. There are many new software tools that are being developed to facilitate these transactions, which will be the subject of my next article.

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