Case Reporting v. Case Management

A preliminary question to ask in selecting a CMS is whether a system that focuses on case reporting or on case management is a better fit for your program. This distinction characterizes an essential difference among various systems or groups of systems.

A case reporting system centers on the need to collect, report on, and analyze data about cases, clients, and casehandling. Data is collected through the intake process, timekeeping, and case notes; it is reported on by running the data through various queries; and it is analyzed by looking at report results to draw conclusions about program operations. The early legal services “case management systems” were all essentially case reporting systems, driven primarily by the ever-increasing data collection demands of the Legal Services Corporation as well as other funders.

A case management system, on the other hand, includes the intake/report information loop, but at its heart is a collection of tools designed to assist with casehandling itself, particularly litigated cases. These systems focus on robust electronic case files containing all relevant documents and information associated with the case (generally meant to replace paper files), calendaring, timekeeping, and tickler systems connected directly to the case or matter files, and complex relational databases that enable sophisticated client and contact management.

Both types of systems have supervisory tools to help managers keep track of the work of the staff they supervise. The case reporting systems allow programs to generate reports regarding the number and types of cases handled and the time spent on them and on other activities. Case management systems also provide tools that allow supervisors to access case work easily, including case notes and documents generated and received by the case handler.

In recent years, the line between these two types of system has become increasingly blurred. The developers of case reporting systems are adding more traditional case management features, while developers of case management systems (generally hailing from the private sector) are creating a more robust intake front end along with the larger library of preformatted reports needed by legal services programs.

That said, most systems still maintains a “flavor” of being oriented toward one priority or the other, and user comments suggest that the orientation can affect the attitude of program staff toward the software. A CMS with a case reporting orientation tends to do a very good job handling LSC-required data, and sometimes an equally good job with data for other funders or purposes. However, such systems also may be viewed by staff as “something the managers need us to use so they can do their reporting.” [11] In other words, the requirement that they put intake information into the computer, as well as keep time, case notes, and other information in the CMS, is not really about their own work; it’s simply for the convenience of management.[12] While staff members who view the CMS this way generally use the system as required, many do not go beyond the basic requirements and do not see the system as a tool for enhancing their own client service and performance or the performance of the program as a whole. Having a CMS that is focused on case reporting can reinforce the view that what management or the program cares about is the number of cases processed.

Systems with a case management orientation, on the other hand, are viewed sometimes as important tools to support the work of casehandlers and sometimes as a collection of unnecessary “bells and whistles.” At best, the availability of a robust tool to support cases and matters is seen as a way for staff to enhance their own productivity (as one former private sector attorney put it, “without my own administrative assistant I could not practice law if I didn’t have this system”) and as a way to support the program’s more extensive work beyond basic advice and brief services. At worst, a program buys an expensive case management system that is used only as a tool for intake and reporting, when those may not even be the system’s most effective features.

Thus, in making the CMS choice, a program should think about which orientation it wants to emphasize and why. As one director put it, “The CMS should reinforce mission, not determine it.” For example, a hotline program, or a program that has made the decision to focus mainly on advice, brief services, and more routine cases, may find that it is much more cost effective and makes more sense to the staff to use a CMS oriented toward case reporting. On the other hand, a program choosing to emphasize more complex litigation or an approach based on more community work rather than individual cases may see the choice of a case management system as a way to move more in that direction.[13]

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