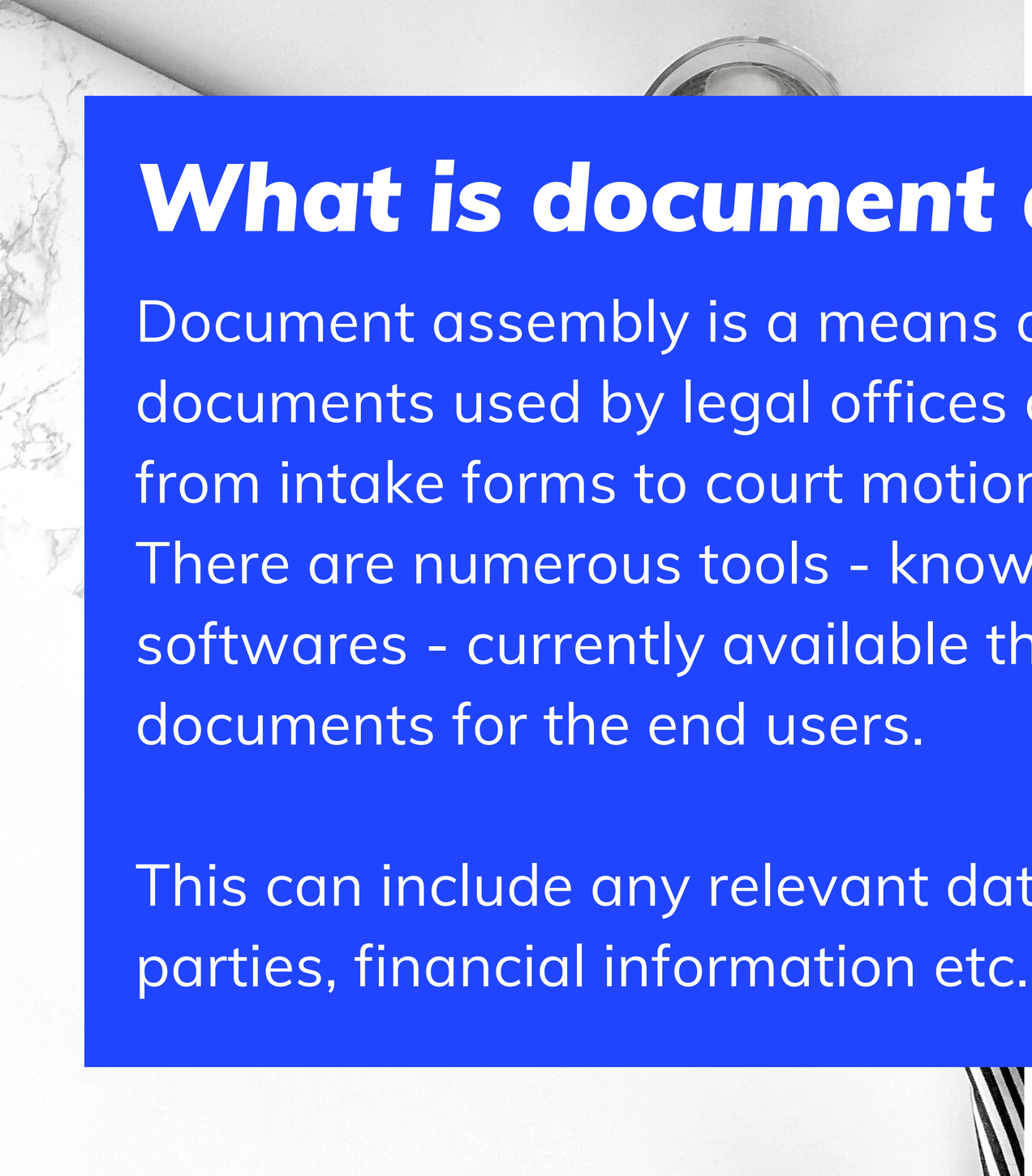
The Importance of Document Assembly Platforms for Legal Services

Why document assembly is crucial for legal services and a comparison of document assembly platforms.

Legal Services National Technology Assistance Project



What is document assembly?

Document assembly is a means of creating templates for documents used by legal offices and services. This can be anything from intake forms to court motions, to name just a few possibilities. There are numerous tools - known as document automation softwares - currently available that will automatically populate documents for the end users.

This can include any relevant data, such as names, case numbers, parties, financial information etc.

Why is document assembly important for legal services?

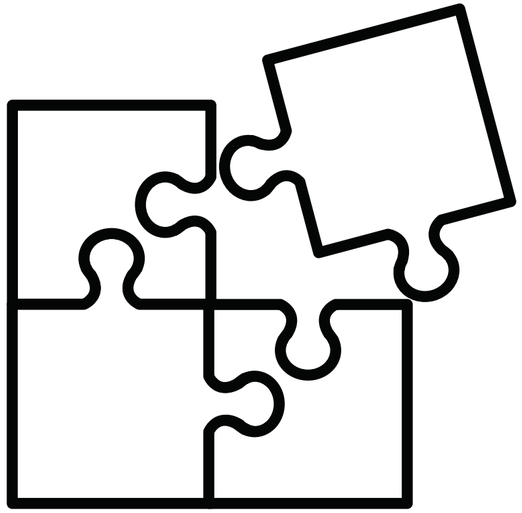
Document assembly and automation platforms are particularly important tools for legal services in order to provide efficient and streamline service for clients. It is also crucial for legal nonprofits that help pro se litigants understand and complete required court and legal documents.

There are multiple document assembly platforms that exist, specifically for legal services and non-profits. This is a very individual decision based on the particular needs for an organization, such as price, integrations, programming skill, etc. The following provides information on popular platforms.

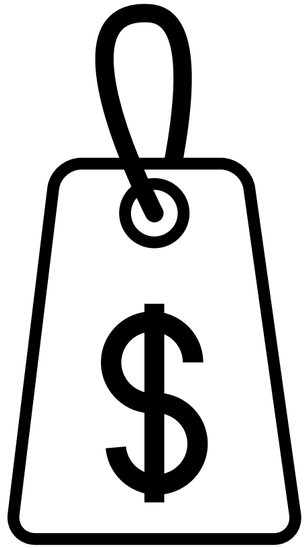
This following also provides a more individualized assessment of each platform: Document Assembly Platform Comparison.

What to look for when choosing a document assembly platform?

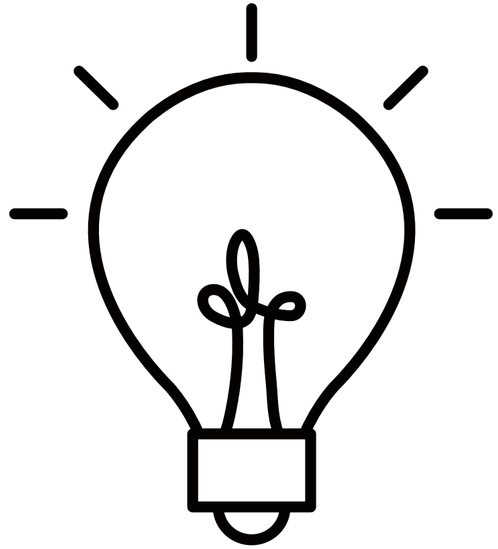
PRICING



SKILL REQUIRED AND TRAINING



INTEGRATIONS AND HOSTING



HotDocs

Document automation for small to mid-sized organizations
Scalable document management
Assembly system for complex documents

Pros:

- Good for customization and creation of forms
  - Premade sets also available
- Multi-person access to templates at one time
- Once templates are drafted, operates smoothly and efficiently
- Can accept data from other systems

Cons:

- More complex system
- If a user forgets to back up the system, could lose information
- No mass-document downloading available
- Simple/easier from the user perspective
  - But creating/maintaining templates requires programming skill

Pricing

HotDocs Advanced (basic, <100 users): $25 per user/month

- Assemble multiple documents through a single interview
- Easily author templates in Microsoft Word with PDF output
- Forward publishing capabilities
- Template version control User management (permissions, authentication, active directory) Minimum 5 seats ($125)

Advance for Enterprise (100+ users): Custom quote

- Includes all basic features, plus:
  - Custom-built templates
  - Robust API integrations
  - Deploy in the cloud or on-premise

Skills and Integration

Skills required:

- Onboarding training is a must
- Coding required to create templates (includes complicated codes to insert into Word)
- Back end product design is tricky, developer recommended
- Software is written by coders so the thought process is not as intuitive to non-coders

e-Filing Integrations:

- Can be integrated with other popular business systems
- Emphasis on automatic transfer to a court's intermediary electronic filing company

Hosting

Hosting capabilities:

- HotDocs Server: designed for on-premises, server-based document generation

- HotDocs Cloud Service - multi-tenant, cloud version of Server, designed for enterprises that don't want to pay upfront costs and upkeep of Server

Partnership with Law Help Interactive

Training Materials

- Personalized training
- In-person Live online
- Webinars Documentation
- Videos
- Expert on video call

Overall

- This is one of the most comprehensive doc. assembly system
- Customization is key here
  - Requires significantly more training and coding skills for development
- The training materials are obviously extensive and longer term
- Overall, the price is good for what is included, but the learning curve is greater than the other platforms

A2J Author

A streamline and easy-to-use document assembly platform for through "non-technical" authors
Centered on increasing access to justice
Quick and efficient

Pros:

- Front-end interface and enhanced functionality
- Appears to be more user-friendly for the consumer
- Able to create interviews with less technical training or assistance

Cons:

- Not as customizable

Pricing

- Available for free to courts, legal service organizations and members of the HotDocs development community
  - For non-commercial use

Skills and Integration

Skills required:

- Little technical assistance or training needed
- Basic introduction to document creation is helpful

e-Filing Integrations:

- E-filing and case management system integration since 2010
- 4 federal district currently use A2J Guided Interview as a front end to pro se e-filing process

Hosting

Hosting capabilities:

- Free hosting of A2J Guided Interviews and A2J Templates
  - Intended for use by pro se litigants on A2J.org
  - Publishing interview to a2j.org creates a URL that can be shared with end users
  - From that URL end users can run the A2J Guided Interview
    - Also create documents and save answers for later use.

Can upload A2J Guided Interview to LHI National Server

Training Materials

- Monthly online trainings
- Workshops for new users
- How-to videos/guides
- Practice exercises

Overall

- A2J Author is less customizable, but it is user-friendly
- Ability to create more with less technical skill
- It is marketed as a cheaper option
  - Requiring less code compared to similar platforms
- Overall, it appears to serve its purpose efficiently and effectively

DocAssemble

An open-source and free software for document assembly
Central focus on utilizing programs based on Python, YAML, Markdown
Documents created in PDF, RTF, or DOCX

Pros:

- Completely customizable
- Modern, linear workflow
- Some no-code resources for non-developers
  - (generating questionnaires without code or Word add-in)

Cons:

- Requires some programming/coding skills and technical knowledge
  - For more effective platform use
- Requires a web server configuration to set up the platform on a service (like AWS)

Pricing

- Free, open-source
- No license fee to use

Skills and Integration

Skills required:

- Knowledge of Python is helpful to control the direction of interviews
  - And to extend capabilities of interviews
- Python experience not necessary but makes interview development more powerful

e-Filing Integrations:

- Not currently available but e-filing integration in development

Hosting

Hosting capabilities:

- You can run Docassemble on laptop
  - Amazon Web Services,
  - Digital Ocean, or
  - Another hosting service.

No LHI hosting

Training Materials

- Limited formal training
- Support primarily from Slack group
  - Or submitting issues on Github
- Coding resources available for developers

Overall

- A more comprehensive system if you have the programming skills needed to create better interviews.
- Likely a noticeable difference between code and no-code interviews
- Fewer training materials and users primarily have Slack or Github
    - The trade-off, however, is that it’s open source (free) and has no licensing fee

AfterPattern

A document assembly system specifically for "no code" automations
Allowing non-technical attorneys and users to build online forms
Database available to store files, save data, and smart spreadsheets

Pros:

- Can build “no code” automations
- Open API
- Securely accessed client-portal

Cons:

- Documents created only have “some intelligence”
  - (because of the low-code functionality)

Pricing

- Free Version
- Basic - $40/month
- Professional - $90/month
- Business - $180/month

20% discount to any subscription for non-profits; further discounts for LSC grantees

Skills and Integration

Skills required:

- No significant skills in coding required

e-Filing Integrations:

- No e-filing integrations

Hosting

Hosting capabilities:

- Hosting from own server

No LHI hosting

Training Materials

- No significant personal training included
- Can hire Afterpattern developer for tutoring or full-service
- Tutorials
- Product guides for document automation, and building legal

Overall

- Good for building automations without code
  - There is flexibility to hire a developer
- The pricing options are extensive
  - Large degree of difference between the versions

The FormTool Pro

Platform centered on eliminating errots by up to 60%
Faster performance to save time on repetitive documents
Focus on compliance and reduced old forms

Pros:

- Microsoft Word compatibility
  - Familiar commands/protocols
- Increase speed of creation of repetitive forms
- Easy to create basic forms
  - (intake, arbitration, etc.)

Cons:

- Cannot create multiple documents simultaneously
- No real time data collection
- Tedious to create new forms, difficult for customization
- No IT support, installer, or consultants

Pricing

- Basic - free
  - Options to create and automate simple form documents
- PRO - $89
  - Includes lifetime license

Skills and Integration

Skills required:

- No high-level skills or knowledge required
- Quick learning curve for new users

e-Filing Integrations:

- No e-filing integrations

Hosting

Hosting capabilities:

- Hosting from own server

No LHI hosting

Training Materials

- Video training tools (2 min - 1 hr)
- Full online training, interactive program offered

Overall

- Again, no technical skills required and it is easy to learn
- Some important functions are lacking
  - Such as creating documents at once

Documate

Templates easily made into workflows
Focus on ease of use for users and creators
Apps meant to be "client facing"

Pros:

- Good for attorneys who want to automate documents
  - Without learning a complicated program
- Software can be used by anyone

Cons:

- Limited customization
- Some difficulty with troubleshooting

Pricing

- Lite - $89/month
- Standard - $164/month
- Custom option

Skills and Integration

Skills required:

- No coding skill required
- Software can be used by anyone

e-Filing Integrations:

- E-filing integration expected to launch 2022

Hosting

Hosting capabilities:

- Hosting from own server

No LHI hosting

Training Materials

- How-to guides
- Video training

Overall

- No technical skills required, which prompts some difficulty with troubleshooting
- There is a larger product selection and reviews from attorneys
    - Consistently positive

Odyssey Guide & File

Brand used partners with courts across stated
Trusted for its ease of use and elimination of errors
Easy creation of streamline document assembly platform

Pros:

- Easy interview creation
- High-level skill not required
    - No code Intuitive development

Cons:

- Some features are “outdated”
- Limited customization

Pricing

- Free to use

Skills and Integration

Skills required:

- No significant coding skills required

e-Filing Integrations:

- File & Serve
  - Integrated with Odyssey product suite, file all documents in a single, secure online location
  - Gain access to e-filed case documents and e-filings via a centralized location
  - Track electronic services history/status for users Payment processing for applicable fees

Hosting

Hosting capabilities:

- Hosting from own server

No LHI hosting

Training Materials

- No extensive training materials available on website
- Guide and file basics available

Overall

- Appears to be a generally easy software to use and fairly intuitive for a free system
- The interface appears outdated
  - Not as streamlined as other services