Tablets Help Court Go Paperless in Texas

BY: Brian Heaton | June 12, 2012

Managing dense legal files is now a paperless affair at the Wichita Falls Municipal Court in Texas.

A set of four iPads was introduced to the court in April. Combined with a document management application, the system allows Municipal Judge Larry Gillen and his staff to access and make changes to legal documents in real time. The move has increased efficiency in the courtroom and has helped save a few trees, as case materials are no longer printed out.

Access and editing of documents is done through Laserfiche, a program the court had been using for the last couple of years to help scan and store digital copies of paper-based case files. The mobile version of the application for the iPad was released in May, and Wichita Falls city staff jumped on the opportunity to use it on tablets in the court.

Patrick Gray, business systems analyst with the city of Wichita Falls, called the use of tablets an “experiment.” The four devices are used by Gillen; Stan Horton, the court administrator; Horton’s assistant; and the Municipal Court prosecutor. The tablets were purchased using budget funds allotted to the court.

Before the mobile technology was available, Gray said court clerks could go to desktop computers and pull up cases for Gillen. But once the judge had access to the court’s document management capabilities on his iPad, he hasn’t looked back.

“When I introduced the iPad app to him, it was almost zero training,” Gray said. “He was already using Laserfiche. I had to train him on the security stuff we have in place with VPN, but it wasn’t a two-hour sitdown.”

Driving Change

The ability to manage documents on a tablet required the court to go wireless. Prior to the introduction of the iPad, no wireless network existed, so one was created. The iPads don’t have a data plan associated with them, so they only operate using established Wi-Fi. Use of the network is restricted to court personnel, and as a further security measure, any employee wanting to access case documents must have separate authorization on the Laserfiche application.

In addition, while some of Laserfiche’s resellers offer remote document storage, court documents such as a case’s originally filed complaint, memos filed by counsel and administrative files associated with a legal proceeding are maintained on a server in the Wichita Falls IT department.

Gray also mentioned he’d like to see the application incorporate a video-conferencing function in
the future. He said that would be a feature the court would be interested in, so that the judge may be able to administer court from remote locations, and two people can remotely collaborate on a document together. Currently users have to switch back and forth between Apple’s FaceTime app and Laserfiche in order to do that.

The Wichita Falls Municipal Court is also in the midst of procuring a new records management system, which Gray believed would be online this fall. He also felt the upgrade would show the full value of operating a paperless courtroom on a tablet.

“The jury is still out,” Gray said. “The judge is a power user, I’ve been a power user and his court clerks … haven’t really found a complete use for it yet. Until I can find a use to integrate it into their everyday process, I don’t think [they’ll be] as good with it as the judge.”

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