

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

COURTROOM AUTOMATION,
STREAMLINING DATA ENTRY,
AND
IMPROVING UTILIZATION OF COURT STAFF57TH DISTRICT COURT
ALLEGAN COUNTY, MICHIGANINSTITUTE FOR COURT MANAGEMENT
COURT EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM
PHASE III PROJECT
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The 57th District Court, located in the City of Allegan, Allegan County Michigan, is a limited jurisdiction court with two elected judges and 24 full-time support staff. It is statutorily designated as a first-class District Court with countywide jurisdiction.(*1) A first-class district consists of one or more counties in which each county comprising the district is responsible for maintaining, financing and operating the district court within its respective county.(*2)

This report and project is a "work-in-progress" where the 57th District Court administrative team, composed of the judges and court administrator, will research, evaluate and assess the feasibility of developing and implementing an efficient automated case disposition and scheduling system. We are reviewing ways to restructure the current procedures for entering dispositions and preparing notices to appear, and evaluating ways to better utilize existing staff. Available technology will be examined as a tool to improve customer service and as a method to reallocate existing resources for the purpose of streamlining case data entry.

The 57th District Court administrative team recognized the need to better utilize existing staff and to find ways to improve and redesign existing processes. Our philosophy is to work smarter, not harder.

The impact of inefficient caseload, repetitive or redundant data entry, and backlogs in case file preparation are significant problems that dramatically affect the efficient use of time and resources, and ultimately impede performance.

Two of the main methods of information gathering for this project are networking with other courts in the State of Michigan via the Internet and on-site visits, and interviewing court staff. The third method of information gathering will be a study of the length of time necessary to enter certain case information. The fourth method of information gathering will be independent research on the subject matter.

The report and project are focused on the need for courtroom automation, the benefits of real-time scheduling and noticing, the implementation of a more stringent adjournment policy, the redesign of the existing case scheduling and disposition practices, and the impact on internal and external customers. Research includes a review of literature related to caseload management, an evaluation of the court's current caseload management and procedures, and information and feedback from internal and external customers.

Change in court organizations seems to be the new status quo. In managing change, three issues are important. The first issue is to recognize the need for change. The second issue is to formulate and share the vision of how the court will work after the change. The third issue is to commit to educating staff, a willingness to confront the issues and individuals that stand in the way, to realign the resources, and to measure the results of the process.(*3)

How court staff copes with change is an issue and concern for a good manager. Because courts have considered themselves immune to change for such long periods of time, courts must be particularly sensitive to the intensified challenges caused by inevitable changes.

The first major change made by the 57th District Court was its reorganization in 1995. As newly appointed court administrator, the judges and I formed an administrative team to embark on a long and winding road of reorganization, growth, changes, improvements and enhancements.

We implemented several changes in a very short period of time. We soon realized that too many changes in a short period of time lead to confusion, frustration and failure. From this experience we learned to keep projects and changes small and to build on their success as time goes on.

Management can greatly reduce uncertainty by openly sharing information with staff. We realized in a very short period of time that it is vitally important to keep staff informed of what is transpiring within the organization, to involve them in all projects, and to educate and guide them in the workings and expectations of the court.

Courts must recognize that all areas of the justice system are affected by its ability to process cases in a timely fashion. Many studies have focused on the need for courts to reduce delay. Successful caseload management is based on the concept that it is the court's responsibility to control the progress of its cases. This concept is emphasized in the five principles of caseload management, including early court intervention; establishing meaningful events; establishing reasonable timeframes for events; establishing a reasonable timeframe for disposition; and creating a predictable system.(*4)

We are focusing on four specific areas of repetition and/or redundancies; specifically, 1) data entries by disposition clerks on cases that are placed on probation status; 2) data entries by disposition clerks on cases not on probation status; 3) the scheduling practices of the assignment clerk, and 4) adjournment of cases.

One of the problems most trial courts face when looking at case management issues is that when the question is asked - "why do you do it that way?" the response is generally the same - "because that's the way we have always done it." What is the 57th District Court seeking to achieve and improve? By streamlining our current procedures we can improve productivity that may defer future staff increases and enable us to remain current with present staff; improve services to staff, citizens, attorneys, prosecutors, and police agencies; and improve the staff's ability to process cases in an accurate and timely fashion.

By implementing courtroom automation procedures and eliminating repetitive data entry we will open a new frontier for this court. We are seeking the best solution to improve case processing, looking at creative ways to save both cost and time, while maintaining high performance standards.

Our goals are to provide effective and responsive services to all of our customers, both internal (staff) and external (agencies, general public, police) given our current level of resources and allocations; and assure compliance with legally mandated requirements, assuring the best customer service possible.

Where will this take us and what will we accomplish? We believe we will expand and enhance skills of the staff; better utilize the existing staff; enhance our teamwork concept; educate the staff regarding courtroom procedures; emphasize the court's philosophy of working smarter, not harder; reduce repetitive handling of case files; reduce paper distribution; increase public trust and confidence in the judicial system; and utilize resources, time and technology more efficiently.

The staff is enthusiastic about sharing ideas, information and job redesign. Strong leadership by the judges and the court administrator will help to create the changes, but ultimately it is the individual employees that will make it happen. Everyone at the 57th District Court has recognized that there are problems with the existing processes and that there is an urgent need for improvements. There must be a commitment to change. We have all made that commitment.

Some of the foundations for good caseload management are a workable scheduling system, efficient case disposition methods, and courtroom automation. The 57th District Court's current scheduling and disposition procedures are not as efficient as they could be, and to continue the current method of processing is a detriment to the court and its users. Accurate and timely scheduling and disposition entries are vital for good public service. By automating the courtrooms, redefining the job tasks of certain clerk staff, probation secretaries, and judicial staff, we will better utilize their skills and expertise, reduce the delays in case processing, and reduce the delays for litigants.

All of the work that has gone into this project can serve as a baseline or a guide for our caseload management improvements. Some research is still in progress. The suggestions, ideas and concerns of the staff have been received and reviewed. It will take time to implement the goals and objectives that will improve the caseload management functions. We anticipate implementation of the new procedures by the end of this year. The end result will be increased productivity, quality work products by the staff, and affirmation of the court's commitment to continually improve its processes and procedures.

(*1) M.S.A. 27A.8127; M.C.L.A. 600.8127.

(*2) M.S.A. 27A.8103; M.C.L.A. 600.8103.

(*3) Lawrence P. Webster, Automating Court Systems, National Center for State Courts, 1996.

(*4) Caseload Management: A Practitioner's Guide, Michigan State Court Administrative Office, October 1993.

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