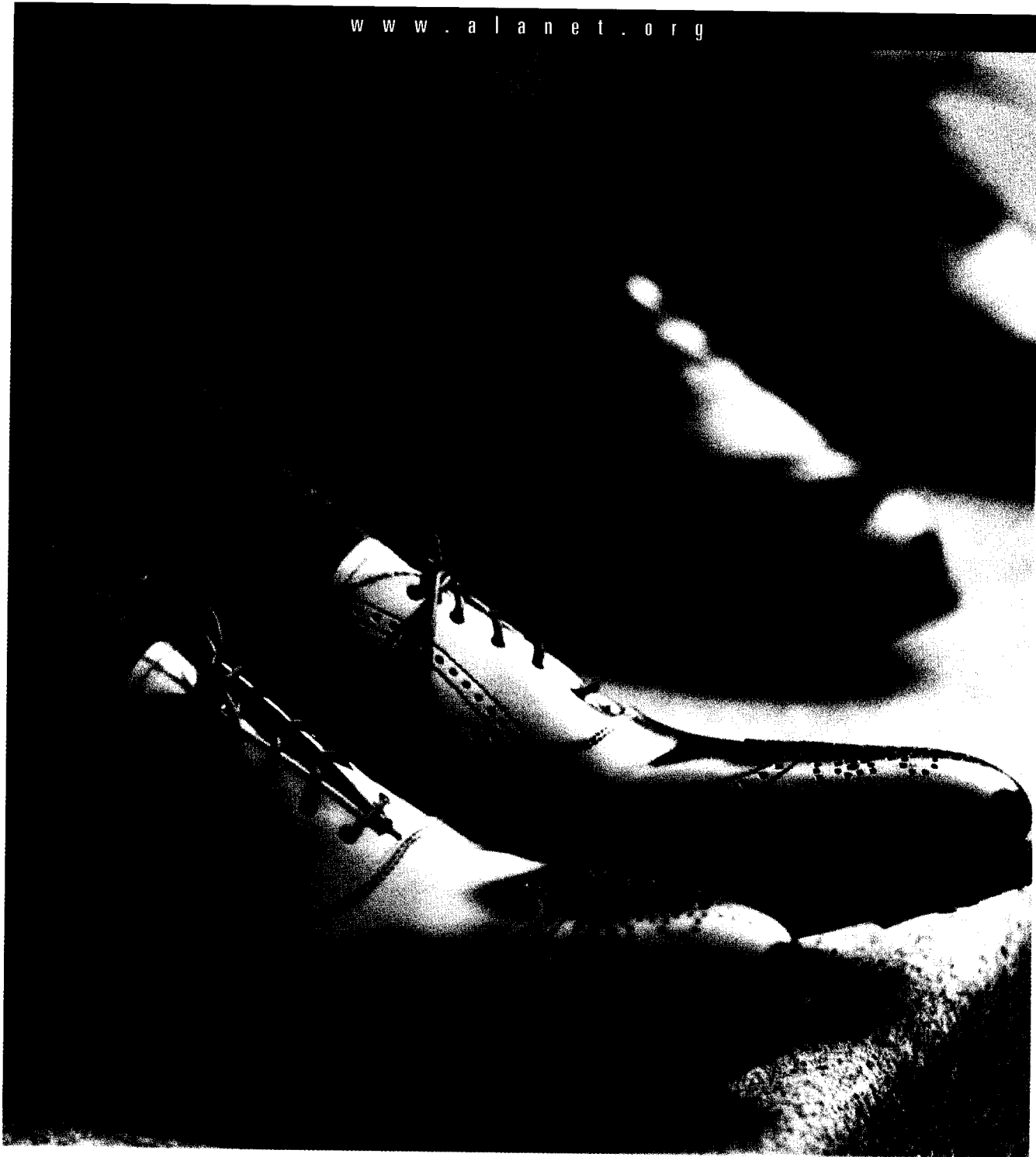


# *Legal* Management

September/October 2000

www.alanet.org

Volume Nineteen/Number Five \$6.95 U.S. & Canada



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# Competitive Edge

TechnoLawyer.com

## EXTRAnets! EXTRAnets!

*Firm Managers and Marketers Should Read All About 'em*

BY CHRIS SANTELLA

*Note: This article originated in The TechnoLawyer Community, a free online community in which legal professionals share information about business and technology issues, products and services. To join the TechnoLawyer Community, simply fill out the form by visiting [www.technolawyer.com](http://www.technolawyer.com).*

The odds are good that clients will soon request — or mandate — that the legal information they have retained a law firm to produce be made available to them through an electronic platform, using the reach and power of the Internet. One such platform, the extranet, already exists and has rapidly gained popularity among law firms that deal with complex cases or many clients at a given time, and with corporate legal departments that oversee the efforts of numerous outside counsel.

Today, your firm probably executes much of its day-to-day work via e-mail. But as a means of attorney-client communication and information exchange, e-mail does not afford the security and confidentiality so important to your clients. Extranets offer an easy-to-use, more robust alternative to e-mail: They enable firms to make commonly requested files accessible via virtual filing cabinets; exchange documents and even track version control via an integrated document management system; and discuss a case or matter in a secure environment with easy-to-follow threads.

### **Intranets/Extranets Defined**

An intranet serves as an internal computer network that uses Internet technologies such as TCP/IP, FTP, HTTP, POP e-mail, etc., but remains private, operating only within a firm. An extranet expands upon the intranet idea. It provides selected people outside the company with limited access to information contained on an internal network. Users obtain entry to the system through the Internet and can access only the information for which they are authorized. Extranets provide unique platforms for communicating with people outside a firm, such as clients, co-counsel, opposing counsel and so forth.

### **What Can Firms Do with Extranets**

Law firms can use extranets as follows (this list is by no means exhaustive):

- *Private Conferencing:* This feature provides secure bulletin boards on which users can discuss key matters privately. Communications are neatly organized by client, case or matter. Private conferencing works better than e-mail for ongoing discussions, as users always have access to an organized, dated thread containing previous comments.
- *Document Exchange and Collaboration:* This feature provides users with an area in which they can make docu-

ments available for client and co-counsel review and receive feedback. Users can grant editing or read-only rights to other participating parties. This function eliminates the hassle of circulating documents via e-mail or fax, and makes new edits immediately available to all participants. Anytime a user views, modifies or adds to a document, associates and clients receive an e-mail notification, thus keeping all participants apprised of new developments. A “viewer history” component in the document exchange area allows the user to verify that clients or outside counsel have accessed and read a document placed on the site.

- *Calendar/Bulletin Board:* This function lets users communicate to clients the dates and times of important events relating to the case or transaction at hand. It also works well as a meeting planner — if a party has a conflict and can't attend a meeting, the extranet informs everyone else involved.
- *Search Capability:* Most extranet platforms include a full-text search engine, so users can quickly retrieve any information to which they have access. For example, users can search for case-related information or for favorite forms that reside in form files.

# Competitive Edge

Extranets provide a more efficient way of performing everyday tasks. The sample functions discussed above can certainly streamline many of the common client service tasks performed each day (exchanging documents, making files available, providing answers to simple questions), and cut costs as well through reductions in long-distance calls, mailings and fax transmissions.

There exist marketing benefits as well. Firms can mention their extranet service and the attorney accessibility it affords in requests for proposals and at so-called "beauty contests." On another level, however, the use of an extranet can help redefine the mechanism of client service, and in the process raise it to a higher standard.

## Reports from the Trenches

"What prompted my firm to consider an extranet solution was a simple

recognition that you often distinguish yourself in our business not by your legal acumen, but by your attention to service," says Ken Youmans, a partner in the Los Angeles office of Seyfarth Shaw Fairweather & Geraldson. "Clients know that no firm has a monopoly on legal talent. What allows you to attract, retain and grow relationships is service. Good service is tied intrinsically to timely communication. Timely communication, in turn, often is a function of accessibility."

Seyfarth Shaw recently deployed an intranet/extranet system called Collaborator from Niku Corp. ([www.niku.com](http://www.niku.com)) (formerly marketed as Legal Anywhere Collaborator).

"Niku's extranet makes our lawyers more accessible to our clients and facilitates communication," Youmans says. "For national clients for whom we do work in most, if not all, of our nine domestic offices, the advantage of in-house lawyers communicating at any-

time with geographically dispersed lawyers in our firm is significant. The problems of three-hour time differences and the all-too-often long game of 'phone tag' are obviated."

Dallas-based Carrington Coleman Sloman & Blumenthal, L.L.P. ([www.carringtoncoleman.com](http://www.carringtoncoleman.com)) recently installed a similar intranet/extranet. The firm has used this technology to streamline several complex development projects and to coordinate multiple cases for a client.

"The extranet can be very helpful when working with in-house counsel on discovery response, particularly answers to interrogatories and requests for admissions," says Jean Foster, Carrington Coleman's paralegal coordinator. "It is a wonderful tool to keep in-house counsel very involved in your pre-trial preparation."

"Several of us are currently involved in the acquisition by a Fortune 100 company of a site for redevelopment as a

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chip-design laboratory and office facility," says Charles C. Jordan, a partner at Carrington Coleman. "Members of the client's work group are on the road a great deal, and their offices are in at least four different locations. We are posting files central to the acquisition process to the extranet. This area of Carrington Coleman's extranet has just been set up, and we are very enthusiastic about the discipline it brings to file organization. It forces us to focus on issues like how to generate 100 percent digital files for all documents — no more copy jobs on exhibits — and what the composition of distribution lists should be to maximize workgroup efficiency."

Like any new technology, the level of intuitiveness a program affords is extremely important if a skeptical constituency is to embrace it. Seyfarth Shaw's

Youmans says, "The effectiveness and value of the extranet solution turns significantly on its full utilization by firm lawyers and client personnel. If the program intimidates all but the techies, then its value is diminished radically."

## Building an Intranet/Extranet

There exist two primary options for deploying an intranet/extranet — homegrown and outsourced. Regarding homegrown solutions, firms can purchase and install the necessary hardware to host the system, and dedicate consultants and IT personnel to design, build and maintain the system. This process typically results in a tailor-made solution — with a premium price tag.

As an alternative, firms can outsource the intranet/extranet to a technology firm that will design, maintain and host the system. With this type of off-the-shelf solution, firms can save valuable IT resources for other projects, and save on the considerable consulting fees and

hardware costs likely to accrue from building an intranet/extranet from the ground up.

For smaller firms, such off-the-shelf applications may be the only realistic option from a cost standpoint. Larger firms also tend to select the outsourcing option, due to the limitations many of them have encountered with homegrown projects.

## Important Considerations

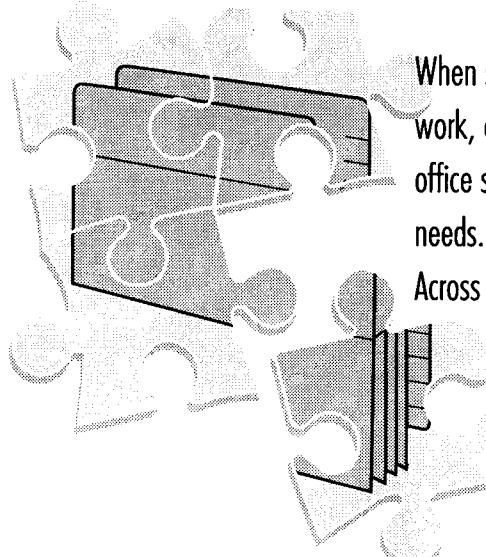
When reviewing extranet solutions, firms must consider three critical criteria: security, scalability and usability:

- An extranet that lacks adequate firewalls and stringent encryption measures is next to worthless. Make sure any solution you choose meets minimum requirements set by Internet industry standard bearers, such as Netscape or marchFirst.
- Scalability stands as an important issue because you will want an extranet that can easily expand to accommodate new clients, new internal users or new outside counsel that begin participating in a case or matter. If the wheel must be reinvented each time a new participant comes on board, the solution is not much of a solution.
- An extranet platform not easy to understand — no matter how secure or scalable — will unlikely gain much of a following. Firm staffers and clients must completely understand and utilize this technology in order for it to work to its fullest potential.

By embracing extranet technology before clients mandate it, firms will display a proactive stance toward client service, and likely discover a more effective means of communication. ❖

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