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Centralized Matter-Centricity in a De-Centralized Environment

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Special to the Legal

When deploying matter-centric document management, law firms are going out in droves to create centralized data environments, i.e., technical environments where real-time data is accessible across multiple offices and locations of a firm while the actual documents reside in one home office. Some firms, however, because of bandwidth or other issues, are unable to use this typical centralized design, opening the door for negative impacts on collaboration, redundancy and upkeep of folders.

Given those risks, firms that cannot implement a classic centralized matter-centric design are finding alternatives through use of software and creative technological implementations.

WHAT IS CENTRALIZATION?

Centralization simply means locating all of a firm's servers in one central location, such as the firm's headquarters or at an off-site co-location or data center. In the classic centralization design, the firm's data is accessed across branch offices across the wide area network using firm applications installed on local computers. The major benefits to centralization involve the convenience of having data accessed, viewed, updated, collaborated on and filed within the confines of a singular database, eliminating the headache of having multiple copies of files and data floating around a firm.

Other benefits of centralizing data are numerous, but most firms that are able to



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centralize look at cost reduction and high availability. With centralization, cost savings are often derived from a variety of factors, including less software, which could result in fewer licensing costs, less hardware and less maintenance because of fewer machines running.

High availability is another advantage that firms find when centralizing data. Housing a firm's servers and hardware in one location simplifies the replication process from a single data center to a failover site in the event of a disaster or outage.

CENTRAL NOT ALWAYS SIMPLE

Desirable as centralization is for most multi-location firms, there are a number of limitations that might impede a firm from centralizing data. In general, the deciding factors as to whether a firm can centralize

are connectivity and bandwidth. For some firms, the right kind of bandwidth is not easy to obtain. For one thing, the cost of the proper bandwidth can be prohibitive, running into the thousands or tens of thousands of dollars in some cases. For medium-sized firms with a few offices, these bandwidth costs can exceed an entire information technology budget. For other firms, location is often an issue, as a firm headquartered in the Midwest with a branch office in New York City, for example, may not find the right kind of bandwidth accessible, leaving the firm unable to centralize the data.

Another challenge to the classic centralization scenario involves geographical limitations. If a firm, for example, uses bandwidth to centralize its information technology system from its headquarters in San Francisco to its satellite East Coast office, software programs can begin to suffer from latency, i.e., it can take too long to make a connection and get information from point A to point B. While firms with significant distance between offices come to expect minimal delays involving e-mail and accessing applications, centralized offices can see a decrease in productivity if these delays become excessive and interfere with workflow.

A final challenge has to do with the storage of international data on U.S. servers. With regulatory laws regarding data storage varying from country to country, firms with an international presence must be vigilant when it comes to understanding and complying with data retention regulations. Being negligent in this area can open a firm up to potential lawsuits or regulatory fines.

THE APPEARANCE OF BEING CENTRALIZED

Given the appeal of centralization, firms large and small are retooling information technology systems to centralize data firm-wide. While some firms are centralizing entire information technology systems, others are looking to centralize a single application. Fronting firm wish lists of centralized applications are matter-centric document management applications. Firms understand the importance of matter-centricity from a regulatory, productivity and client-retention standpoint, and allowing all offices access to one matter-centric data management system is a high priority for most firms.

For those firms that find that classic centralization is simply not an option, forward thinking information technology departments and integrators are deploying data management software in new, creative ways to allow firms the appearance and functionality of centralization, while actually running a decentralized, “parallel” design.

One way to achieve this kind of parallel design is for a firm to distribute SQL, DMS and File servers firmwide in each branch

office to allow for optimal performance and availability of systems. Technology is thereby physically decentralized because hardware is not in one location, a challenge for firms that want to see a single instance of a matter throughout the firm, in real time.

To achieve a centralized view, a document such as a pleading is created and physically stored on a file server on the firm’s main network. From there, document management software is used to create local copies of each folder on every database to create the appearance of a centralized system. With this kind of view, attorneys use these “shortcuts” to see if a pleading or similar document has been filed.

The advantage with this design is that these shortcuts or links allow attorneys and staff in branch offices to view folders without actually accessing them; i.e., the shortcuts allow satellite offices the same view as users in the main office where the files physically reside. If a user then needs to actually access a file or e-mail for updating, reviewing or collaboration, he or she can verify that it’s on the network and then pull that document across the WAN. This synthetic view

means that firms with 10 offices don’t have to browse 10 different libraries to view matter content.

UPCOMING TRENDS IN CENTRALIZATION

As business drivers increase the demand for centralized views in decentralized environments, the market is responding with alternatives to classic centralization. Leading the offerings are WAN accelerators or WAN optimizers, hardware devices placed in central and remote offices to help speed data across networks without the need for extra bandwidth. Companies like Riverbed are offering these solutions to companies large and small, in a variety of configurations depending on a company’s information technology setup. WAN accelerators can be a smart alternative for firms facing sub par bandwidth or financial limitations which rule out classic centralization.

Centralization is not going away for firms. Fortunately, alternatives continue to emerge so that midsized firms can reap the benefits of centralization and keep pace with the market and the competition. •