

## Laserfiche ECM Blogs

### Laserfiche speeds the wheels of justice in Cowlitz County

Written by Laserfiche Staff

Running a jail is plenty tough without the paperwork problems.

Yet there it was, the stairwell paper shuffle, an extra daily challenge for the staff of Washington state's Cowlitz County Jail.

"We were supposed to start out with a limited scope," Wirkkala said, "and it's working so well we keep adding more and more and more to it."

—Dee Wirkkala, District Court Administrator

It worked something like this. Twenty five inmates squeezed into the jail's video hearing room on the third floor, the District Court judge receiving their closed circuit televised testimony on the second floor and corrections officer running up and down between the two, collecting the signatures to make it all official.

"Inmates in various states of sobriety and cooperation would wait an hour sometimes two as the paperwork came and went. It was fun", says Corrections Officer Dave Fundingsland, " to sit and watch the bad vibes fester as the wheels of justice worked their way through the stairwells."

"The inmates tend to get restless," said the 15-year jail veteran, noting that there are sometimes volatile combinations of people in that hearing room. "I remember one time we had a husband and wife in there at the same time for domestic violence assault."

That was before they started using Laserfiche. **The new software**, installed because a cumbersome system was about to approach impossible with the jail's relocation across the street, **allows defendants to simply sign an electronic pad** in the video hearing room. No more stairs.

Everything from release forms, to sentences, to no-contact orders are now dealt with in real time, with all the pertinent info and background available to everyone on both ends.

"Now," said Fundingsland, "they're in that room for maybe 15, 20 minutes."

On the other side of the street, District Court administrator Dee Wirkkala says simply, **"I can't imagine what it would have been like if we hadn't done this – we would have had a real nightmare."**



Dee Wakkala

“In a lot of ways it’s more secure than if you had a paper copy,” she said. “What if there’s a fire or a flood or an earthquake? If something happens, a document could be gone forever with no way to protect them.”

— [Patty Kero, Cowlitz IT Ace](#)

“In fact,” she says, “the success has led to one downside of Laserfiche’s installation: “We’re never finished.”

“We were supposed to start out with a limited scope,” Wirkkala said, “and it’s working so well we keep adding more and more and more to it.”

Indeed, thanks to cooperative creative work of Cowlitz IT ace Patty Kero and Laserfiche vendor VP Consulting, the software has brought into sight a once unthinkable goal: An almost entirely paper-free courthouse.

“You could feel that something extra good was going to happen from the start,” said VP VAR Vicki Pattle, a Laserfiche reseller since 1993. “In the end, the programmer, Patty Kero, broke new ground in using Laserfiche.”

Along with the jail system installation, Kero wrote a program for the small claims court that Wirkkala insists is responsible for “a huge efficiency upgrade” since its arrival in March.

When someone comes in with a new small claims case — lawyer-free lawsuits of less than \$4,000 from the five surrounding towns covered by Cowlitz County District Court – it’s paperless from the start.

“When the original file comes in, we use Laserfiche – we don’t build a file, we don’t save paper,” said Wirkkala, noting the obvious advantage over traditional filing.

“We had (an old paper file) this morning that got misfiled and we probably spent three hours trying to find this physical file, where if it had been (in Laserfiche) we wouldn’t have had to look for it.”

With cases that come in now, any of the **court's 16 staffers can instantly access the entire file without having to worry about who has it or where it needs to be.** That includes the judge, who links to Laserfiche through a monitor right on the bench.

But as important as the software itself, according to Kero, has been its ability to adapt to the specific needs of its users. They were able move along cautiously in the jail and courthouse, she said, making minor adjustments as any issues arose.

"We did take it slow," said Kero, explaining that "the software really evolved with them."

Fundingsland, who operates the system at the jail, calls it "pretty much flawless."

When we first started we had to make changes here and there," he said. "We called (Kero) and it was done."

The success has bred more plans. Soon, the judge will be able to sign an electronic pad to finalize, record and print – for parties to take with them — his decisions in one step.

And it's hoped that by the middle of next year, defendant's lawyers will be able to access Laserfiche via the Internet and handle their client's in-court needs electronically.

Combine that with the notion of scanning and eliminating the tens of thousands of old files stored in cabinets, and Wirkkala says it's whole new world. Consider that last year alone there were **26,427 cases filed**, and each file averages roughly **20 pieces of paper.**

"Then we do have some that are 6 inches thick," she said.

All of it, argues Kero, will be safer when the work is done. There is password security for all files and disc back-ups stored off site.

"In a lot of ways it's more secure than if you had a paper copy," she said. "What if there's a fire or a flood or an earthquake? If something happens, a document could be gone forever with no way to protect them."

The advancement, however, leads to yet another nice-to-have problem: How to use the newly vacated space.

"There's a whole section where we keep small claims, and now there's nothing there," said Wirkkala. "Every once in a while I'll walk up there to pull a file and say, 'Oh, wait a minute...' Just to get rid of even half of this stuff would be amazing."



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