

Laserfiche ECM Blogs

Laserfiche Law and Order

Written by Laserfiche Staff



Judges are often not fond of challenging the status quo and paperwork has definitely set a precedent in America's courthouses. But as electronic document management is moving into courthouses across the country, Laserfiche has been going Hollywood—turning trial testimony into made-for-TV high drama.

Washington County State's Attorney, Hagerstown, MD

When attorney Brett Wilson signed on with the Washington County State Attorney's office, tape recorders, photos, notes and witness verbal testimony were brought to bear in the daily routine of trying cases. Film footage and a movie projector provided an occasional change of pace.

In the last few months all those prosecutorial tools have been rolled into one, which Wilson now says has transformed his job as never before in his twenty years before the bench. The prosecutor's office has merged its Laserfiche document management system with the Washington County District Court's Nomad public address system to put trial evidence and testimony into a whole new light.

"Sometimes it seems like the jurors are watching 'Law and Order,' only it's live," Wilson says referring to the popular television courtroom drama series. "It's a whole new way of communicating with the court and jury."

Instead of pulling papers out of briefcases, drawing diagrams on chalkboards, or setting up movie projection screens where, hopefully, most of the court can see them, Wilson and his colleagues just plug their laptops into the Nomad system and call up the evidence needed from court case files stored in the Laserfiche system back at the office.

Instantly, photos, illustrations, diagrams, sworn statements or signed confessions flash on monitors in front of the judge, clerk, witness box, defense table, and on two, 48-

inch flat-screen TVs in front of the jury box. Telestrator technology allows attorneys or witnesses to draw on the images on the TV screens, doing for courtroom testimony what football commentator John Madden did for instant replay.

After the image is amended through the testimony provided, it's then stored back into Laserfiche as a new version, with a hard copy printed out and entered into the court's trial evidence file. It's a little like Perry Mason meets Monday Night football, Wilson says, and it's made a dramatic addition to courtroom testimony.

"We can illustrate for the jury all kinds of things from the image stored on Laserfiche," he says. "Location of evidence, where an incident took place where the lighting was and what type of evidence was found."

Wilson used a recent case involving a hunting accident to illustrate the Laserfiche/Nomad system. When a bullet had torn through a home in a housing development, hunters who were perched on a rocky outcropping on a neighboring farm ended up facing charges of criminal negligence.

An aerial photo of the farm stored in Laserfiche was called up from the case file and displayed on the court system of monitors and flat-screen TVs. The prosecuting attorney then illustrated on the image where the bullet was found tracing a clear path to a rocky knoll. The hunters were convicted but of lesser charges, in large part because the Laserfiche/Nomad system made clear their stray bullet may have been careless but not criminal.

"Pictures work a lot better when you can work better with them," Wilson says. "By being able to display the image that way and mark where the hunters were and where the evidence was found, we provided concrete visuals for things that eventually helped the court make a better judge the case."

In another instance, video footage of a drug buy taken with a hidden microphone and camera by a police confidential informant proved the key in making the conviction. When the drugs and money changed hands the prosecutor was able to freeze the image and zoom in. Technology turned everyday court room testimony into a production worthy of the popular Hollywood television program CSI, Wilson says, all on 48-inch flat-screen TVs in front of the jury.

"The CSI effect is very much in effect," he says. "And the jury's ability to digest that information on widescreen TVs right before them can make a very big difference in the outcome of cases."

In each case, the visuals made it much easier for the jury to make up its mind, Wilson says. Being able to call up such a range of images from Laserfiche in court makes it much easier for Wilson and his colleagues to do their jobs.

This system is the latest expansion of Washington County's drive to go paperless. It all started two years ago with a presentation by [Jeff Sauter, of the Eaton County, MI, prosecutor's office](#), according to Washington County State's Attorney Charles Strong. Since Sauter installed his Laserfiche system four years ago, [he's spoken about the many benefits of embracing paperless technologies](#), most centered around organizational advantages: never losing case files, less duplication of paperwork, faster access to files, remote and simultaneous access to files. Strong's office wanted to take it a step farther and use it as a trial tool.

After Sauter's presentation, Strong got the green light from his own IT people and the Laserfiche software was installed a year ago. Washington County has since been back-scanning archives and started using the new system in earnest just the past few months, Strong says.

Laserfiche WebLink gives attorneys open access to the database from the WiFi-enabled courthouse. Quick Fields instantly indexes scanned items as they are being stored into Laserfiche allowing Washington County to keep current with incoming documents while digging deep into the office's massive archive, storing it all in Laserfiche. The office's juvenile court files have been back-scanned into Laserfiche and now the Washington County staff are working on other departments.

"We still have old paper files we were forced to work with, but that number is going down daily," Strong says. "We're very satisfied with Laserfiche. It's been a life saver. Instead of having all that paper flying around, we were able to centralize everything."

While the Nomad system helps present testimony much more effectively, Laserfiche is the steward of that all important documentation, Wilson says.

"It's the workhorse that makes sure those testimonial documents are right where they need to be when they need to be. Laserfiche is particularly helpful during sentencing and motions hearings when unexpected demands for documents such as a criminal record, are more common," Wilson says.

"It gives you a feeling of comfort knowing that if something is in the case file and scanned into Laserfiche, it's also right there with you in the courthouse," he adds.

York County Court of Common Pleas, York County, PA



A short distance to the northeast in Pennsylvania, the head of the [York County](#) Information Technology Division, Al Raniero, said his office is also interested in Laserfiche's potential in the trial setting. With the multi-faceted, multi-departmental Laserfiche system the county's judicial agencies already have in place, York is definitely well on the way.

York County's court system is three years into its push for paperless operations and has reached deep into the system's various legal operations along the way. [The Sheriff's office, including their central booking office, the county jail; adult probation; children and youth services; Clerk of Courts office and divorce courts all use Laserfiche document management in various capacities.](#)

Where the system is breaking new ground is using Laserfiche in real-time for court testimony in what's called the county's Divorce Masters Office. These officials are appointed arbiters in disputed divorce cases. Before the matter goes to court the Masters review the arguments from both sides in an effort to plot a course for the case in court. What happens in court can deviate from the sworn depositions submitted beforehand. When it does, the Divorce Master calls up the sworn statements stored in Laserfiche in real-time to see where testimony may have strayed from earlier statements.

However, when it comes to testimony in criminal cases, that documentation must still be displayed through conventional means on an audio-visual cart burdened with overhead projectors, tape players and Microsoft PowerPoint presentations downloaded onto laptops. All for display on a single large-screen TV for the entire court to view.

York County's Laserfiche repository has plenty of photos and even streaming video that could all play a useful evidentiary role in court proceedings, but now must be retrieved from Laserfiche and converted into more traditional media for display on the AV cart. As more and more documents, film or photos are being stored in Laserfiche, improving the availability of that documentation in the trial setting seems as useful as it is inevitable, Raniero said.

"We could take it to that next step, that would be something that I would definitely like to discuss with the court," he said. "That's very doable for us as well."

One stumbling block is how the system might be accepted by outside attorneys, Raniero said. Attorneys with varying technical skills come into the courthouse, and bringing them all up to speed quickly on such a novel system could be a challenge. The county is working hard in that department, expanding Laserfiche throughout the entire county court system.

The reluctance by some judges and court staff in York to embrace the technology early on has yielded to a wholehearted endorsement of its continued expansion—which has resulted in some 15 million court documents being stored in Laserfiche.

A computer terminal in the court clerk's office now provides access to those files to members of the public. York is also working on a project to provide remote, password-secure access to the court case database through Laserfiche WebLink for private attorneys practicing in the York area.

“By the end of June we hope to have 15 million documents available to 400 attorneys practicing in the area,” said York Senior Project Administrator Mary Jane McCluskey. “Our court administrators are committed to the imaging project.”

So committed that Raniero wants to go farther still. Plans are in motion to install computer terminals in York's 19 district courts, so judges there have direct, real-time access to Laserfiche throughout the county.

Such instant access has already greatly streamlined York County's ability to take other judicial matters out of the courtroom. Video cameras, monitors and electronic signature pads posted in the judge's chambers and the county Sheriff's central booking facility have taken arraignments out of the courtroom almost entirely.

With Laserfiche WebLink, arrest histories and outstanding warrants are available to the judge in real-time in his chambers so there is no hand copying and delivering of those documents for each arraignment. The judge also appears on a monitor in central booking's processing room for a video arraignment of the prisoner, who no longer has to be transported to the court for live arraignment.

Someday, judges will have immediate access to documents stored in the county's Children and Youth Services department's Laserfiche database when they are hearing dependency cases.

Raniero is setting his sights on new horizons as old ambitions are achieved in York's roll-out of Laserfiche throughout more county agencies. Seed money from Congress and continued funding from property deed filing fees provided by York's Records

Improvement Fund have moved the three-year project along. Now, Raniero says he's wondering if federal stimulus money might also be applied to new projects.

One idea Raniero is considering is a tracking system for paper-based case files. Right now, Laserfiche Audit Trail tracks access to confidential court files stored in electronic format, even as that access is opened up in the next few weeks to hundreds of attorneys who practice in the county's court system.

However, paper files are still required from time to time and tracking them can be trickier. So, Raniero is proposing placing tiny microchips within the paper file folders. That way, court officers can know when files have been removed from county offices and where they've gone.

That technology, and the expanded use of Laserfiche documents in real-time trial settings are still a little way down the road. Raniero said. As new technologies are adopted and implemented new applications continually surface that promise new efficiencies. York County's courts are proceeding judiciously and with deliberation, Raniero said.

"My approach is to do everything in phases," Raniero said. "We need to walk before we run."



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