

Laserfiche ECM Blogs

Creating Order out of Chaos

Written by Laserfiche Staff

A lot of people associate an electronic document management system (EDMS) with the goal of realizing the “paperless office.” But as the St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana, Sheriff’s Office shows, it’s possible to realize all the benefits of an EDMS—including greater staff efficiency, smarter work processes and lower overhead costs—without entirely doing away with paper copies of important documents and records.



The Lake Pontchartrain Causeway, which connects St. Tammany Parish to New Orleans, is the longest bridge in the world.

Prior to installing Laserfiche®, staff in the office’s criminal records department spent most of their time managing paper. The department’s supervisor, Captain Margie Hennessey, remembers the floor-to-ceiling filing cabinets staff would have to search through when detectives requested a file. To save storage space, records older than five years were transferred to microfilm; finding information in those files required staff to locate the correct film cartridge, load it into a microfilm reader and scroll until they reached the page they were looking for.

“Although the indexing system we used was fairly efficient, searches could take us anywhere from a couple of minutes to an hour or more,” Hennessey recalls.

“Occasionally, we’d start looking for a document and discover that it had been misfiled. At that point, chaos would often result, as everyone got involved in the search.”

The office's IT staff began researching document management systems with the goal of eliminating these manual search processes and reclaiming physical storage space. After evaluating several systems, the office selected Laserfiche because of its ease of use and because of the local technical support they'd receive from their Laserfiche reseller, ImageTek of Louisiana. Staff were also impressed by the system's security features. "It's critical that we protect the information in our case files—most of which can't be released without a court order," Hennessey explains. "Scanning documents into Laserfiche makes them much more secure than the paper copies we used to store in filing cabinets."



"During Hurricane Katrina, we experienced some very traumatic times. At one point, the records division was down to three staff members—and we usually have a staff of nine. If it wasn't for Laserfiche, we wouldn't have been able to keep up with our caseload."

Captain Margie Hennessey
St. Tammany Parish Sheriff's Office

Now, when detectives create a case file, secretarial staff scan the documents into the Laserfiche repository, where they're stored in electronic folders whose structure replicates the physical filing system the office used in the past. As part of the scanning process, Laserfiche's OCR functionality indexes each document's content, making it immediately available for full-text searching.

Although Hennessey and her staff do a lot of scanning themselves, they also perform quality control on documents scanned by the secretaries. "We make sure that each document is legible, is indexed correctly and can be retrieved by our detectives," she says. The detectives particularly appreciate the Laserfiche Plus™ module, which enables staff to quickly burn documents to CD. Because each CD includes a built-in document viewer, detectives can use the same search tools on these documents that they use on their desktop computers to search the full Laserfiche repository. "Thanks to the CDs, our detectives can review case documents on their laptops from wherever they need to be—and even work on cases from home," Hennessey says.

Despite the time and efficiency savings Laserfiche has brought to the sheriff's office, detectives continue to create a paper file for each of their cases. "The district attorney likes to have physical copies of documents on hand, for use during discovery," Hennessey says. "So, after we scan the case file into Laserfiche, we deliver the original documents to the district attorney's office, and they store the paperwork in their records room."

Even though staff in the district attorney's office continue to work with paper documents, Hennessey explains that they, too, have benefited from Laserfiche. "We provided the district attorney's office with view-only Laserfiche licenses. Whenever we send them original documents, we drop the scanned images into their Laserfiche folder," she says. "Thanks to Laserfiche, staff in that office can now view documents right on their computer screens, and they can use the system's search tools to quickly find the information they need, without having to look through the paper file."

In addition to the criminal records department, other divisions within the sheriff's office use Laserfiche to streamline processes and eliminate paperwork. For example, the human resources department uses Laserfiche to manage personnel files and job applications. The jail uses Laserfiche to manage booking sheets and inmate health reports. And the occupational licensing division uses Laserfiche to manage documentation on each of the 8,600 vendors registered to do business in the parish.

Along with its flexibility, one of the major strengths of the Laserfiche system lies in the way it helps government agencies continue operations when a disaster occurs—something that was put to the test when Hurricane Katrina struck St. Tammany Parish in 2005. Hennessey says that, as the hurricane approached, she and her colleagues were confident that the office's criminal records were secure. "Our IS division regularly backs up all our servers. Once the hurricane passed, they brought the servers back online, and we went back to work," she says.

Once the storm passed, however, the parish had to deal with the aftermath. "We experienced some very traumatic times; there was devastation and loss of life all around us," Hennessey remembers. "We lost several employees due to relocation. At one point, the records division was down to three staff members—and we usually have a staff of nine. If it hadn't been for Laserfiche, we wouldn't have been able to keep up with our caseload."



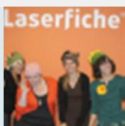
A good old-fashioned Louisiana crawfish boil.

That caseload has only increased in the years following the hurricane, as displaced residents from New Orleans and other neighboring areas have resettled in St. Tammany Parish. But Hennessey and her colleagues haven't had any trouble keeping up with the demands that accompany all of this growth. "In the four years since we installed Laserfiche, the parish's population has increased by more than one-third, and our office has put 35 more deputies and 20 more detectives on the street," she says. "Yet we haven't hired more staff in the records department."

She adds that staff are both more productive and more accurate than they used to be, and that they spend far less time making photocopies and searching for documents. In fact, since the office installed Laserfiche, they've reduced their photocopying costs by two-thirds.

Hennessey doesn't mince words when she's asked whether she'd recommend Laserfiche to other law enforcement agencies. "Not only would I—I already have," she says. "We've had staff from other agencies visit our office, and they've been impressed with what they've seen. Generally, they're most concerned with budgetary questions, and I tell them that Laserfiche will pay for itself in a short period of time.

"Laserfiche has definitely helped us better serve the parish's citizens," she continues. "Laserfiche makes us more efficient, meaning we can organize case files and get them to the district attorney's office more quickly, which helps the parish keep criminals off the street. Prosecuting the people who commit crimes is the bottom line—there's nothing we do that's more important than that."



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