

## Now for something completely different

by Charles Christian, Legal Technology Insider



### Introduction

Seneca CM is one of a growing number of products from relatively new faces in the market that do not fall neatly into the conventional legal accounts/practice management and/or case management pigeonholes. This is a pity because Seneca is at risk of being overlooked by firms who opt for the familiarity of traditional legal systems when they would be far better off choosing Seneca. So what is so different about Seneca?

### What's the difference?

The developers, **emis intellectual technology**, describe Seneca as "a one-stop contact, activity and file management" system although this really doesn't do it justice, as that makes it sound like a glorified version of Microsoft Outlook.

In fact probably a better analogy is the entire Microsoft Office suite as Seneca CM now contains just about everything a law firm needs to run a practice today. Currently this includes: case management, contact management, file management, accounts and practice management, workflow management, document management (including redlining and version control), resource planning, web publishing to extranets, the ability to create more reports than you can shake a stick at, email, fax and scanner integration and even an integral digital dictation facility. And, also like Microsoft Office, you get the whole lot for a single all-in-one price.

### What's the cost?

How much? The list price is £1250 per seat in year one. However, along with all the software - and there really are no hidden extras - this also includes implementation and training. In subsequent years, the price falls to £250 for support but also includes technology refreshes to the latest release version. Now clearly there are cheaper individual products out there but once you start factoring in the additional cost of all the elements that are bundled in with Seneca, the **emis** pricing starts to look ultra-competitive.

### What does it do?

**emis**' development director, Chris Spencer, says the best way to look at Seneca is as a giant Lego set providing firms with the building blocks to make it do whatever they want it to be. For example one law firm is using it to manage what is effectively a class action involving volume claims for 'vibro white finger', whereas one of its major roles at a medical charity is to manage contacts and the organisation of its annual three day conference on clinical negligence.

## Who is it for?

The target audience are what Spencer calls “aspirational firms” (these can be niche practices, in-house legal departments or larger firms - the biggest Seneca site – so far - has 100 plus users) who already have a degree of IT competence, want to improve their business processes and feel that although they have outgrown traditional PMS and case software, they do not want the hassle of best of breed solutions - or as Spencer puts it: “want legal software without having to turn into a software house.”

## How does it work?

The USP here is Seneca’s inherent flexibility, in that it can very easily be adapted to meet the changing needs of law firms, giving them the ability to effectively reinvent themselves and their working practices when they chose to move into new areas of legal work - but without simultaneously having to reinvest in a whole new technology infrastructure. What gives Seneca this flexibility? The answer is its underlying design, which breaks down the system - and legal work - into a series of building blocks based on files. Documents are files, financial ledgers are files, when a lawyer takes on a new client they open up a file. New fields can be added to a file as a matter progresses - again adding a degree of flexibility that is impossible with traditional turnkey case management systems. This file-based approach also offers spin-off benefits in terms of both finding information and user training thanks to a Google-type approach to searching. No need to worry about mastering menu systems, folder hierarchies or reporting methodologies, instead you just type in what you are looking for and run the search.

## How does it look?

One point that does need highlighting in a little more detail in the Seneca CM user interface. Increasing numbers of legal systems now have either a Microsoft Outlook or web browser interface whereas Seneca offers what can probably best be described as a portal look and feel.

So why this approach?

According to Chris Spencer there were a four main reasons: The first was **emis** wanted to avoid the scenario of users opening up more and more windows on the same desktop and the associated risk of stuff being filed in the wrong folders. Secondly, it was felt that as fee earners spend a lot of time working with documents, a web browser was not an appropriate environment. Thirdly, they wanted to be able to do their own thing and develop Seneca according to their agenda, rather than have “Microsoft wagging our dog” and forcing them to change the system every time a new version of Outlook was released. And, finally, they did not want Seneca to be just another “Outlook clone - as everybody else’s systems look like Outlook and we wanted to differentiate our product” which also makes a lot of sense.

As for the actual Seneca interface, it not only does what it says on the tin but during its development phase **emis** had a team at Leeds Metropolitan University check out the design for usability. And, if you really must have Microsoft Outlook, Seneca can offer full integration and synchronisation for contacts, appointments and emails and, through this, support for PDAs such as the BlackBerry.

## Conclusion

Overall verdict?

Don’t be put off by the fact this system seems to do everything, it really does.

It is also not a system that lends itself to easy categorisation. In the right hands - those ‘aspirational firms’ that ‘get it,’ in terms of what Seneca is all about - this is a great system with an inherent flexibility to accommodate the changing needs of modern legal practice. But we suspect its benefits and approach will fly straight over the heads of firms with a traditional mindset. There again the latter group would never use Seneca CM to its full scope, so they may as well opt for more familiar - albeit in many instances more expensive - solutions.