

OVERVIEW OF THE OFFICE OF COURTS ADMINISTRATION (OCA) 'INFORMATION AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY STRATEGIC PLAN'

The following summary has been prepared to provide legal practitioners with a summary of the direction that the OCA is intending to take in respect of Information and Information Technology (I&IT) in the delivery of its services over the next three year period.

OCA has recently developed and released a draft Strategic Information and Information Technology Plan which is intended to deal with the current and progressive advancements relating to Information Technology and how those advancements may be adapted and utilised in the delivery of existing and new services provided by OCA.

What is the I&IT Strategic Plan?

OCA's I&IT Strategic Plan outlines a direction for OCA in improving the current delivery of services through:

- enhancing the current technology;
- providing a management strategy to implement changes; and
- deal with further technology advancements during the term of the Strategic Plan.

The Strategic Plan was developed by OCA with the assistance of judges, magistrates, associates, and the legal profession.

OCA's vision for the future

The primary role of OCA can be described as follows:

"to assist the judiciary to administer justice in an efficient, appropriate, economic and accurate manner which is reasonably attainable whilst still acknowledging the service needs of the court's clients."

In addition to this primary role, OCA also provides and processes data which is used by a number of NT Government (eg NT Police, the NT Attorney Generals Department, and the Director of Public Prosecutions). The data is provided to assist the Departments in the performance of their respective functions.

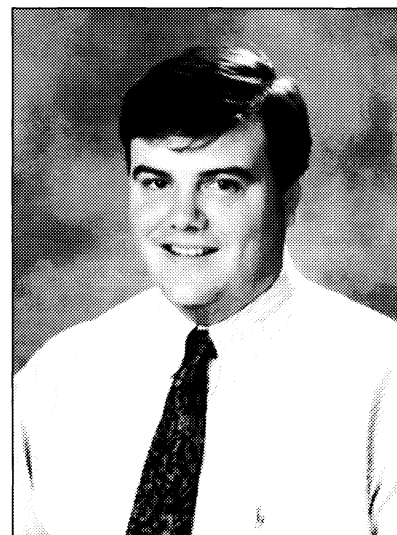
OCA's stated vision is to achieve a number of imperatives to enhance service delivery over the life span of the Strategic Plan. OCA describes these imperatives as follows:

- To support the judicial process, in particular to provide services which will add value to court related services, such as efficient and effective use of information and information technology by the judiciary;
- To achieve substantial progress towards ensuring the court system is readily accessible to members of the public via internet services and information, and open information sessions at the courts; and;
- To institutionalise the organisational changes required to align OCA with its 'Corporate Plan'. The Corporate Plan aims at providing further assistance to the judiciary, enhancing the working relationship with the judiciary, improving court administration processes, efficient administration of resources, implementing the latest technology for the courts service delivery, and advancing the community confidence in the court administration services.

Where is OCA now?

OCA is currently in a position, along with other judicial bodies in Australia, where the realisation of the benefits of using enhanced information systems within the judicial environment is only a short step away. OCA is presently facing change in the provision of service delivery which demonstrates an increasing requirement for enhanced information, along with well integrated information technology systems in providing these services.

Over the previous few years OCA has invested significant funding towards the installation of local area networks, personal computers, and electronic mail. However this investment is about half way to achieving a full realisation of the benefits of recent information technology (IT) advances.



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The judicial system is, at present, moving towards a more electronic orientated system. This is evidenced by the use of electronic rather than paper-based information in the court services, the use of enhanced business applications such as electronic evidence, the furtherance of rural access to the courts through IT, improvements in videoconferencing facilities, and the use of the electronic courtroom.

At present very little use is made of IT within OCA to disseminate court information either internally or externally to the court. In addition, the major business system of the courts, the Integrated Justice Information System (IJIS), has been under pressure due to technological changes over time and numerous funding restrictions.

Although technological advances have surpassed the current IJIS system, OCA does not believe that a complete overhaul and implementation of an alternative core business system is a consideration. OCA argues that regard must be given to investment to date in the existing system and public familiarity. The main recommendation of the Strategic Plan is the re-engineering of the IJIS system, whilst keeping track of advancements in comparative products to ensure benchmarking against the cost of solutions to changes in the IJIS system.

Through achieving the objectives of the I&IT Strategic Plan, OCA should be in a position, following the life of the Plan, where technological advancements, such as those mentioned above, will begin to be tangible to all users of the court system.

What benefits can I&IT give to the courts?

The main benefits of I&IT for OCA would be a substantial reduction in costs (in particular with large scale litigation), expeditious judicial decision making, and greater efficiency in the courts administration facilities (dissemination of information, and access to facilities).

An example of the cost benefits of IT advancements within the court system comes from the Estate Mortgage Case. The Estate Mortgage Case began in 1990 as a large scale commercial litigation case. In order to hear the case a special courtroom was set up with a large network of computer terminals accessible to all parties involved in the litigation.

Throughout the trial documents were able to be imaged and stored as they were produced or tendered, and when they were later required, the documents could be viewed within seconds after being requested. The court also had the benefit of 'real time' transcript, which enabled information to be accessed within or outside the courtroom via the internet, provided parties had an account and password with the system.

Lawyers involved in the case who were connected to the network, were also able to access the information and follow the case without having to physically be in the courtroom the whole time. The result of the above was an expeditious and cost effective trial. In the end it was estimated the use of the network saved about fifty percent of court time and approximately \$3 million in legal costs.

The Estate Mortgage Case is only one example of the benefits available to the court and their clients as a result of recent technological advancements. Although the above example would provide greater benefit for large scale litigation, technological progress can also benefit Local Magistrates in summary and criminal matters. Benefits may arise from accessibility to a vast amount of information at the click of a mouse, such as prior records, social service reports, and

the like to assist the judiciary in an expeditious decision.

Where does OCA aim to be in three years time?

OCA aims to have achieved the following goals within the three year life of the Strategic Plan:

- Establishment of mechanisms aligning I&IT with OCA's strategic business directions;
- Re-engineering of the core business systems to replace manual based systems (such as paper handling), and greater use of videoconferencing facilities; and
- Establishing more cost effective e-business applications (essentially to close the gap between the current status of the business systems which will provide greater access and efficiency with judicial information).

In practical terms court users and the public are likely to see a number of initiatives in place by the end of the Strategic Plan. Some of the initiatives will be:

- Ongoing review of the court's e-commerce facilities, with the aim of establishing structures which will allow the electronic lodgment of court documents, and electronic bill payment;
- An electronic court book which will enable the establishment of an electronic court;
- Establishment of a judicial support system which will aid the judiciary with the provision of access to judgements/sentencing, legislation and transcript;
- Improvement in court room resources where appropriate equipment will be identified and installed for the presentation of digital video evidence and image evidence;
- The link of all or most of the courts through the use of audio/videoconferencing material; and
- The trial and evaluation of implementing voice recognition software within court rooms for the benefit of the judiciary and the parties through videoconferencing.

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