LEGAL TECHNOLOGY CONFERENCE

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11 November 2004: eCourt Overview

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JUSTICE ROSLYN ATKINSON
Supreme Court of Queensland

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1.　QUEENSLAND COURTS

The Queensland Courts, for the purposes of this paper, are defined as
- the Supreme Court comprised of a Trial Division and an Appellate Division
- the District Court
- the administrative units to support the above groups.

The Queensland Courts sit permanently in 8 centres and travel regularly to 25 other centres on circuit. Registries dedicated to servicing the Queensland Courts are located in Brisbane, Cairns, Townsville and Rockhampton. In all other centres registry functions are conducted by the local Magistrates Court Registry.

1.1　Queensland Courts Organisational Context

In Queensland the administrative arms of the Courts are a part of the Department of Justice and Attorney-General. The Courts do not constitute a separate Courts Authority in their own right as they do in South Australia.

1.2　The Information Technology Team within the Courts

The Department of Justice and Attorney-General (JAG) includes an Information Management Branch that provides IT services to the Queensland Magistrates Courts and all other areas of the Department, with the exception of the Queensland Courts. The administrative arm of the Queensland Courts includes a small IT team that operates independently of the JAG Information Management Branch.

The Department of Justice and Attorney-General operate a number of IT systems, such as a Wide Area Network and Internet Firewalls that the Queensland Courts also use.

2.　STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

The Queensland Courts strategies in the delivery of information technology services are:
- To continually improve service to litigants, the legal profession and other clients by striving to further the initiatives developed by the Courts in terms of electronic service delivery and electronic business.
- To improve the dissemination and open communication of information by ensuring that information is accurate, current and easily accessible to litigants, the legal profession and the general public.
- To continue to improve service delivery in regional areas to ensure that remoteness of location is not an impediment to receiving quality service.

2.1　Operational Objectives

In 2004-2005 the Queensland Courts will undertake the following operational activities that will help it achieve its strategic objectives, including;
- The redevelopment of its civil case management system

This 12-18 month project will facilitate the deployment of the civil management system to all Queensland Courts registries and will increase the on-line service offerings of the Queensland Courts.

- The migration of the Queensland Juries System from a mainframe, provided by an external entity, to an internally managed system.

    This activity will reduce recurrent costs associated with operating the Juries system.

- The consolidation of the Queensland Supreme and District Courts criminal management system with the criminal management system used in the Queensland Magistrates Courts.

    This activity will also reduce costs and create process efficiencies within the courts system.

3. EXISTING SYSTEMS

3.1 Registry management – Civil

Civil matters are managed through a product primarily developed in-house known as the Civil Information Management System - CIMS. The purpose of CIMS is to record all case related details for the Supreme and District court. This includes, cases, parties, legal representatives and documents. It also includes the ability to schedule interlocutory, trial, and registry appearances and the record the results of those appearances.

CIMS manages matters using a case/process based model. CIMS is presently used in the dedicated Queensland Courts registries only.

A major activity of the Queensland Courts during 2004 and 2005 will be the redevelopment or replacement of CIMS.

3.2 Registry management – Criminal

Criminal Cases are managed through the Criminal Register System – CRS. The CRS system provides similar, though somewhat more limited, business functionality as the CIMS system provides in the civil jurisdiction.

CRS is presently used in the dedicated Queensland Courts registries only.

3.3 Registry management – Court of Appeal

The Court of Appeal uses a product known as the Court of Appeal Management System - CAMS. The CAMS system differs from CIMS and CRS in that it uses a more flexible event based design rather than the case/process design.

The event based model used in CAMS generates daily lists of tasks for registry staff based on case bring-ups.

3.4 Jury Selection

Jury selection and management is assisted through the use of an application known simply as the Queensland Jury System. The system has an interface to the Queensland Electoral Rolls to assist in juror selection. In Brisbane the Jury system also produces cheques for the payment of Juror expenses.

3.5   Office Automation

The administrative arms of the Queensland Courts use a Standard Operating Environment to deliver basic office functionality, such as word processing and electronic mail. All staff can send and receive e-mail via the Internet, however, not all staff have the ability to browse the Internet.

3.5.1 Technical Definition

The Standard Operating Environment is comprised of the back-end and front-end systems. The back-end systems are based upon Microsoft technologies including Windows 2000, Active Directory and Exchange. The front-end systems are also based upon Microsoft technologies including Windows XP and Office 2002.

The Queensland Courts environment sits within the Department of Justice and Attorney-General environment, however, is secure and managed solely within Queensland Courts.

3.6   Remote Access

The Department of Justice and Attorney-General maintains dial-in facilities as a part of the Wide Area Network that is also used by the Queensland Courts. These dial-in facilities are used whenever a judge requires access to the Judicial Systems and a network connection is not available.

The solution is very secure and requires authentication a personalized token, PIN number and username/password before access can be obtained.

3.7   Electronic Service Delivery

The Queensland Courts have, in recent years, worked towards delivering information electronically to the legal industry and members of the public. Such information is still available through traditional methods.

The Queensland Courts electronic service delivery portal can be accessed at http://www.ecourts.courts.qld.gov.au/.

3.7.1 eSearching

A large volume of counter based transactions are simple searches. Such transactions attract a fee and are time consuming to conduct. The Queensland Courts have now made available the ability to conduct a number of civil searches electronically, at no cost.

The ability to conduct searches electronically has seen the number of counter based transactions decrease and the number of searches overall increase. An average of

900 searches are conducted each day through eSearching. The initiative has created efficiencies internally, for the legal industry and increased the service offerings to members of the public.

3.7.2 eChambers

Chamber Applications can be very time consuming for all parties considering the short duration of many chamber hearings. eChambers creates a virtual forum for parties to make submissions, submit documents such as draft orders for consideration of other parties and the judge and to even facilitate the publication of an order by the judge. The virtual forum can be accessed at any time, from anywhere.   All that is required is Internet connectivity and a user password.   This technology has significant potential to save litigation costs particularly those relating to physical court appearances.   It also fast tracks the resolution of minor procedural disputes such as those typically considered in Applications hearings.

eChambers is currently in pilot and has been well received to-date.

3.7.3 Technical Definition

The eSearching and eListing services access a replica of the CIMS database held internally for remote users to access. The eChambers service is based upon a Microsoft Team Services portal.

3.8 Evidence Management/Trial Facilitation

Complex litigation often involves large volumes of documentary evidence and can result in lengthy and expensive trials. The Queensland Courts are committed to improving the efficiency of such trials.

Rather than maintain and operate an evidence management system in-house the Queensland Courts have adopted a strategy of guiding parties at the outset of trials that may benefit from an evidence management system. The courts encourage parties to jointly select a third party to provide and operate an evidence management system for the duration of the trial.

4. PROPOSED SYSTEMS

The Queensland Courts have made significant progress in recent years through using technology to enhance the operation of the courts. The next priority for the courts is to consolidate the gains made to-date and position the whole IT environment so that a consistent systems architecture is used and sustainable support mechanisms are established. After the new architecture is applied to the core civil management system (CIMS) further electronic service delivery initiatives can be pursued.

A Queensland Government initiative is the Integrated Justice Information Standard that seeks to create synergies between all groups involved in the administration of justice, ranging from the Police through to Corrective Services. The Queensland Courts will remain cognisant of IJIS and factor it into future plans.

4.1 Registry management – Civil

It is planned to redevelop or replace the CIMS system as the language that the product is written in is no longer supported by the vendor and it will become increasingly difficult to migrate from in the future. A redeveloped CIMS, with a browser based front-end, will allow simple access over a Wide Area Network and will cater for electronic service delivery in its design.

A web based interface for CIMS will also allow it to be deployed to all registries performing Supreme and District Court registry functions.

4.1.1 Technical Definition

CIMS will migrate to Microsoft SQL 2000 and be redeveloped using the Microsoft .Net architecture.

4.2 Registry management – Criminal

A major activity of the Queensland Courts during 2004 and 2005 will be the consolidation of CRS with the criminal management system used by the Queensland Magistrates Courts (QWIC).

4.3 Registry management – Court of Appeal

The Court of Appeal system (CAMS) is presently based on Microsoft SQL server and no changes are anticipated at this time. There may be an opportunity to integrate or link CAMS with the redeveloped civil system.

4.4 Jury Selection

The Mainframe based Jury System will be migrated from a mainframe environment, provided by an external entity, to an internally managed system. This activity will reduce recurrent costs associated with operating the Juries system.

4.5 Office Automation

The Standard Operating Environment used by the Queensland Courts will continue to deliver basic office functionality. The environment has been modified to more closely integrate with the future direction (.Net) of the Queensland Courts systems.

4.5.1 Technical Definition

The Standard Operating Environment (SOE) back-end systems may be upgraded to Windows 2003 Servers with messaging serviced by Exchange 2003. The front-end systems will include Windows XP and may include Office 2003.

4.6 Wide Area Network and Remote Access

No changes are anticipated in the existing Wide Area Network and remote access facilities provided by the Queensland Courts host agency – the Department of Justice and Attorney-General

4.7 Electronic Service Delivery

The Queensland Courts plan to increase the services offered electronically. Improvements envisaged for the long term include the ability to

- publish an interactive sittings calendar
- lodge electronic documents via the Internet
- access electronic copies of documents over the internet, incorporating an Internet payment model
- request trial dates electronically and obtain real-time confirmation of trial date

4.8 Evidence Management/Trial Facilitation

Evidence management systems will continue to be used on a case by case basis. Identification of cases that may benefit from evidence management technologies will be a function of the Case Management process.

The infrastructure required to effectively run an electronic courtroom is significant. Ideally a number of courtrooms would be fitted out to accommodate the needs of electronic trials. To-date such courtrooms are not available in Queensland, however, systems are temporarily installed as required.

It is not envisaged that the current process of encouraging parties to engage a mutually acceptable supplier of such systems will change.

5. CONSTRAINTS

5.1 Business impact

Information Technology is often the vehicle for process change, and to some degree, organisational change. The Queensland Courts, and the local legal industry, have a finite capacity for change within a limited period. Too much change in a short period of time may mean that the changes may fail or not be fully exploited.

The Queensland Courts plan to focus their IT resources at particular issues, in sequence, to ensure changes are successful and do not create undue disruption to the operation of the courts.

6. CONTACTS

6.1 Technology

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6.2 Web

General information about the Queensland Courts can be accessed at the courts web site - http://www.courts.qld.gov.au

The eCourts site focused on electronic service delivery can be accessed at http://www.ecourts.courts.qld.gov.au/

7. SUMMARY OF INITIATIVES 2004-2005

7.1 CIMS Web development

The replacement of the existing civil management system with a modern solution capable of servicing internal court staff and external clients will.

- allow the civil management system to be cost effectively throughout the state, even to low volume centres that are currently processing files manually.
- automate case management processes through the use of workflow tools to provide faster, more efficient, disposal of cases
- enhanced the very popular eSearching service which allows parties to search the civil system in real-time.
- establish a practitioners portal to facilitate two-way, proactive, interaction between civil practitioners (including self litigants) and the Courts. This "MyFiles" portal concept will be a significant advantage for busy practitioners.
- support the use of e-mail based notifications to replace hard copy based communication between parties and the court
- law firms, via the practitioners portal, will be able to re-allocate files within their firms to nominated solicitors, as their practice demands, and electronic Court based notifications will be redirected to the correct e-mail address.
- The practitioner portal will allow applicants to upload draft orders to a file which can be viewed by the presiding judge either during the application hearing or via the virtual courtroom facility. The judge can edit the order as required, make the order and perfect the order immediately. The perfected order can be printed in court or published on-line via the virtual courtroom and will be immediately searchable via the Internet.
- Other documents (eg Judgements), so read into the court record, can also be made available in this manner.
- The Web interface to the system will help consolidate technologies in the Courts as the Citrix Metaframe systems used to deliver the civil system to remote centres will be made redundant

7.2 Migrate Juries systems off mainframe environment

- Will allow the Courts to manage their Civil Management system to be deployed to all our registries as many registries currently manage their low volume of files manually

7.3 Consolidation of criminal management systems

- Will allow Civil Management system to be deployed to all our registries as many registries currently manage their low volume of files manually

7.4 eChambers

- Nominated judges will engage with local Planning and Environment practitioners to run a pilot, involving a significant number of matters, where interlocutory matters are managed on-line using this virtual courtroom facility. The purpose of the pilot is to measure the overall impact of using such technology including time,

cost and business outcome. The pilot will also highlight issues to consider if and when a more widespread adoption of the technology occurs.

7.5 Building Capacity

- Finalise recruitment of IT staff based upon recent restructure
- Embark on a program of IT staff training to provide IT staff with additional skills
- Cross-train IT staff where possible

7.6 Infrastructure improvements

- Half of the PCs used within the Queensland Courts will be replaced with new hardware this year
- Additional vulnerable witness rooms will be established in some regional centres and Brisbane

7.7 Electronic courtrooms

- Engage with the local legal industry through the Association of Legal Support Managers to promote increased use of technology within the courtroom to bring about more cost effective hearings.
- Research options for establishing cost effective electronic courtrooms and develop a strategy to establish such courtrooms

7.8 Significant projects affecting the Higher Courts

- The State Reporting Bureau (a separately funded and managed group) will start rolling out a Digital Recording and Transcription Service (DRATS) to all higher courts.
- Will replace all analogue audio recording technologies and introduce video capture of proceedings
- May be some capacity for rationalisation of management of all Audio/Visual technologies used in court rooms

7.9 Initiatives beyond 2005

- **CIMS Web**
  Continue pursuing aims of the CIMS Web project started in 2004-2005 with particular emphasis on electronic filing and other collaborative on-line services.
- **Electronic document management system**
  Plan the introduction of, and if possible install, the HummingbirdDM electronic Document Management System to better manage the Courts internal documents and facilitate the introduction of eFiling.
- **Electronic courtrooms**
  Fit out a small number of courtrooms to support electronic trials.