

Imaging for King County Superior Court?
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This presents some considerations and concerns regarding the potential use of imaging technology for document management in the King County Superior Court and the King County Department of Judicial Administration (DJA).

- DJA, our court clerk's office, receives an average of 4,600 documents every day. This amounts to about 23,000 pages per day, or 5,773,000 images per year. Almost all documents are letter sized per court rule.
- Documents are filed in individual court files. Every document is time-stamped when received. Each document and event is logged in a mainframe computer (SCOMIS, the Superior Court Management Information System, resides in Olympia); documents are assigned "sub numbers" to identify them and sequentially place them in the file. There are approximately 67,000 new files each year.
- The retention period for Superior Court files is permanent. An imaging system would have to be maintained indefinitely to assure ongoing access to all documents.
- Presently files are held in the clerk's office in hard copy until requested for a courtroom, staff, or the public. After a long period of inactivity, as determined by the mainframe computer, a file becomes eligible for archiving. Once archived, its docket is printed out in hard copy and is microfilmed with the file.
- The existing case file inventory includes approximately 375,000 files on open shelving and more than 1.5 million case files on microfilm.
- By law, the clerk's office must assure that a document is placed in the court file within 5 working days of its receipt. Presently, the clerk's office maintains a 4 to 5 day paperflow standard.
- A frequent complaint by the court is that the most recently filed documents are not in the court file when it is delivered to the courtroom. Since files are pulled for court calendars one or two days in advance, even when paperflow is within the 4 to 5 day period, documents may still not be in the file at the time the file is pulled.
- King County plans to build a new "Regional Justice Center" in south King County in 1995, creating a jail and a court complex. The court will be about half the size of the present downtown Superior Court. DJA would staff a "clone" of itself as a clerk's office for the court there. The instant access afforded by imaging would be an appealing alternative to the potential difficulties of transporting files, documents, and microfilm between downtown and regional sites.
- A court file may have an active filing period extending over one, two, or more years. A civil case which goes to trial will not be tried until 18 or more months after initial filing. Is this a potential barrier to using imaging technology? The documents for a case would be recorded on a number of disks, making retrieval time lengthy or requiring enormous jukebox configurations.
- Are there ways to collect images as filed (non-WORM), indexing them per case, and later to re-record these images on WORM disks for quicker access and permanent retention?
- We presume that the cost of conversion of existing records would be prohibitive.
- Some features of the Superior Court and DJA on which imaging could be built:
 - +King County is installing a fiber optic backbone in the Courthouse complex.
 - +Personal computers are in wide use throughout DJA and the courts. There will soon be personal computers in all courtrooms (even though personnel in some courtrooms do not plan to use them).
 - +DJA is continuously faced with a space problem, as new filings seem to outstrip microfilming efforts and budgets. Imaging would have to result in immediate and tangible space savings.
 - +The bench, bar, and public would appreciate systems which make documents quickly available to courts and users after filing.

- A special funding source for converting to an imaging system does not presently exist. However, it might be possible to seek a surcharge on filings or a similar source of revenue. The King County Records Division was able to fund an optical disk system through a \$2 per recording fee imposed by state law in order to fund improvements in records technology.

- Some "foot-in-the-door" options for imaging could be developed. For example, approximately 11% of our records (about 2,500 images/day) are "sealed" (access limited by case type to certain parties or access controlled by court order). These records are retained in locking filing cabinets in a secured area away from public access. However, this system is not fool proof. There might be interest in converting sealed records to an imaging system which could be made more secure by password and other controls. (Access issues would persist: must these records be printed out in order to be taken to a courtroom where a viewing terminal is not available? could access to sealed records be controlled tightly enough by electronic means?) We also do security microfilming of certain key court documents daily; this work might be done well by imaging. Another potential area for development might be imaging in the new Regional Justice Center complex.

- Some compromise options might also be developed. For example, there are some who argue that there are identifiable "key documents" for every court file. It might be possible to limit imaging (and retention) solely to this more limited group of documents, recognizing all other documents as incidental to the process of a case but dispensable on case completion. This might streamline court procedures and keep imaging and document retention costs down.

- Some other considerations might apply to any imaging system:
 - +DJA's mainframe technology might be integrated with an imaging system to smooth the process of a case and automate docketing procedures.
 - +It might be possible to require that documents filed be bar-coded with the appropriate case numbers and docketing codes. This might allow for more automated data entry and indexing when documents are received, resulting in substantial cost savings. Such a bar-coding system might also serve in indexing for the imaging system.

Regardless of when we might be able to have an imaging system for the Superior Court and DJA, it is necessary for us to keep up on developments and possibilities of this technology. At this writing (April 1992), we are as yet uncertain that imaging technology can handle the case file system on which we must operate. Software-based imaging systems that can use existing personal computers as terminals are promising developments. As we see more possibilities opening up, we can work on building the support for the concept and find the new funding sources it will take to implement an imaging program.

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