

CASE STUDY

British Columbia Attorney General



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OVERVIEW

Industry:
Legal/Court

Organization Info:
British Columbia Ministry of
Attorney General, BC, Canada

Administrative arm of the BC
justice system

Serves 45 courthouses and 44
circuit court locations

Problem:
Duplicative data entry was
time-consuming and prone to error

Cumbersome to retrieve & review
analog records

Storage & filing of tapes &
paperwork costly and inefficient

Goals for new solution:
High quality digital audio recording

Customizable solution - case
management system integration

Intuitive and user-friendly -
minimal learning curve

Streamlined process

Organizational Overview

British Columbia (BC), Canada's westernmost province, has an estimated population of 4.5 million people. The British Columbia Ministry of Attorney General, Court Services Branch, provides 45 fully staffed courthouses throughout the Province, 43 of which include both a civil and criminal registry. Registry offices are open to the public for filing documents, accessing court file information or requesting information on court processes. Services are also delivered in 44 circuit court locations.

The Attorney General Ministry's courtrooms deal with civil, family and criminal matters presiding in the BC Court of Appeal, the BC Supreme Court, and the BC Provincial Court. The Ministry is also responsible for several court administrative processes including case documentation, initiation and processing, file and exhibit management, transcript ordering information and other online court services.

The Challenge

As the administrative arm of the justice system, the BC Attorney General Ministry records thousands of hours of court proceedings, with the information transcribed and transferred to various systems to allow the data to be accessed quickly and easily by many different parts of the justice system.

The legacy courtroom system of analog recording, manually handwriting clerk notes and then transcribing this information into case management systems was quickly becoming unsustainable due to shrinking budgets and a reduction in staff. Further, storage and filing of paper work and tapes is costly and inefficient, and the retrieval of records at short notice is a difficult process. Consequently, the Ministry set out to install an advanced digital audio recording system (DARS) that would enable process integration, resulting in cost and time savings. The advantages offered by digital audio recording for ease of access and provisioning to parties were also very attractive.

Given the challenge of migrating the courts' tried and tested analog and paper-based system to a new electronic system, any new solution had to have the ability to be customized easily to fit complicated but essential court processes.

The Solution

The Ministry of Attorney General required a system that allowed them to customize the way courts captured and transmitted information. To this end, Court Services has made significant progress in customizing the FTR application to work for their specific needs and requirements.

"We knew there would be many change management processes when implementing a new system. The data we record is unstructured and we can't slow down the pace of court proceedings, so we knew we needed technology that would allow us to structure the system from within", says Dan Chiddell, Director of Strategic Information and Business Applications, Court Services Branch.

Andrew Clark, an independent consultant and responsible for overall project management, has been on contract with the Ministry since they began rolling out the FTR solution. According to Clark, being able to customize the FTR Gold suite to meet the process requirements of the Ministry has been a tremendous asset. "Court Services' modification of the FTR solution has enabled the Ministry to commence auto-population of their case management system with relevant information, resulting in greater efficiency of existing processes between the courtroom and the court registry."

(Cont.)

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- Kevin Conn

“The [FTR Gold] product saves us time and has streamlined our recording process. The audio components are of superior quality and...it is easy to access, edit and manage data efficiently.”

- Dan Chiddell

Since registry clerks do not have to duplicate input of data, this capability has resulted in tremendous time savings. Also, the same information is instantly accessible to the many different facets of the judicial system.

While the FTR system offers considerable benefits, the Ministry has also dedicated a lot of time and effort in ensuring new standard practices are upheld throughout court proceedings, thus enabling the new system to work effectively. According to Kevin Conn, Digital Audio Recording System, Product Manager, “Our priority is to create efficiencies within our current procedures, while at the same time increasing data quality. The implementation of the FTR system is a huge step in the right direction, but we also needed to establish a uniform method for data entry. Designing a universal glossary to enable ease of use across the entire system was essential.”

The Benefits

The British Columbia Ministry of Attorney General is considered to be a leader in integrated justice, but their vision to implement a new electronic recording system in court rooms across the Province has taken time. It has been seven years since the Attorney General’s Ministry started the arduous task of integrating a modern and simple system with a long-standing, complex process.

“You cannot possibly imagine the time the FTR system will save the entire judicial process. For example, when an appearance hearing concludes, the details of that are immediately accessible to other justice stakeholders such as sheriffs and police removing the delay of holding prisoners and enforcing orders,” says Kevin.

When selecting the new system, a key consideration for the Attorney General was the ease of use by clerks with years of experience of the courts, but less experience with technology.

“We did face some resistance from clerks who were used to using the old paper-based system. New technology can be scary when you don’t understand it and your job depends on it,” said Kevin. “What’s great though is that the FTR system is incredibly user-friendly. It is very intuitive and you don’t have to be a great typist or a computer whiz to use the system cleverly and effectively.”

FTR recordings are stored digitally, which means the analogue tape recordings are now a thing of the past. As the integration between DARS and the back end case management systems proceed, existing paper work is also becoming a thing of the past. According to Dan Chiddell, not only does the new digital storage mean greater security, but the environmental benefits as well as cost-savings from storage are considerable.

“The product saves us time and has streamlined our recording process. The audio components are of superior quality, and the nature of the technology means it is easy to access, edit and send data efficiently,” Dan says.

“FTR has significantly improved the way the British Columbia Ministry of Attorney General operates its courts throughout the Province, and we are a leader in integrated justice. We are secure in the knowledge that we have access to the latest technology in the area of digital recording, backed by an industry leader.”