

Equal justice

Clerk Dorothy Brown modernizes Cook County, Ill., Circuit Court



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Dorothy Brown ran for Clerk of the Circuit Court of Cook County, Ill., on a promise to move the sprawling court into the 21st century. When she took office in December 2000, Brown discovered just how far the court needed to go to meet that goal.

In one of her first moves, Brown assembled a Management Information Systems (MIS) transition team to evaluate the court's information technology. The results weren't comforting, particularly for an organization that ranks among the busiest circuit courts in the nation.

"We found that the systems were very outdated," said Brown. "We were operating with 1980s software and antiquated hardware. We were using 'green-screen' dumb terminals, so we couldn't take advantage of any up-to-date software applications."

Given the magnitude of the court's operations, Brown saw no alternative but to upgrade.

Litigants file almost two million new cases annually with the Cook County Circuit Court, and more than 400 judges conduct 6.5 million hearings each year in its courtrooms. The volume of record-keeping needed to support this activity is staggering. Court personnel enter nearly 20 million court case activities into court files yearly, and the Clerk's Office manages a total of a half a billion court records.

Brown — an attorney, certified public accountant and an M.B.A. — entered office with a deep understanding of operational efficiency. "I wanted to ensure that we were maximizing our efforts in technology, as well as in business processes," she said.

Brown knew IT improvements would boost efficiency. Even more important, she was convinced new technology would support the Clerk's fundamental mission: ensuring that Cook County citizens receive their constitutional right to equal protection under the law.



"I take this job seriously," she said. "Citizens can't appear before a judge or have legal representation if their records aren't properly maintained or they can't properly file a case. So I see my office as playing a key role in providing equal justice for all."

Fast pace

Brown set three over-arching goals for her administration:

- Creating and maintaining timely, accurate and complete records of court cases.
- Providing justice-related agencies with timely and efficient information services to help strengthen public safety and protect civil liberties.
- Disseminating records and information about court cases and the justice system that are timely and useful for all citizens.

Clearly technology would play a fundamental role in meeting these objectives. The Clerk's Office established a strategic information technology plan to ensure IT deployments aligned with the court's business needs, then Brown moved decisively to automate and upgrade Circuit Court operations.

After she took office, more than 2,300 court employees traded obsolete mainframe terminals for new Neoware thin clients and HP PCs. The court now has more than 2,000 thin client terminals, which deliver the security and manageability of the old mainframe approach, yet allow court staff to use modern office productivity software and access vital services such as e-mail and intranet.

The thin clients cost about half the price of a new PC, said Brown. In addition, they're more reliable and easier to support than the court's aging mainframe terminals. "When one of the green screens would go down, someone from our MIS staff would need to drive to that location to repair it. No one else could deal with such antiquated systems," she said. "Now, with automated tools, they can diagnose and even fix problems without leaving the building."

The Clerk's Office also shut down its mainframe computer in favor of a shared mainframe arrangement with Cook County that saves approximately \$1 million per year.

"The savings come from reducing hardware, software and maintenance costs, along with the reassignment of a few staff positions," said Craig Wimberly, CIO for the Clerk of the Circuit Court.

Brown's office negotiated service-level agreements with the county to ensure the newly consolidated services would meet the court's requirements for computing performance and reliability. The Clerk also needed to maintain control of data transferred to the county mainframe to protect certified court records.

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“We carved out a separate section on the county mainframe that our computer operators manage,” said Wimberly. “So we’re saving money, and we’re doing it in a way that maintains the integrity of court information.”

Faster service

Among the Clerk’s largest IT undertakings was installing a \$5 million integrated cashiering and security system throughout the Circuit Court. The new application links cash registers in court offices to courtrooms and the court’s enterprise accounting system. Now, when a judge levies a fine, that information automatically travels to a cashier, who quickly can complete a transaction with the defendant. The cashiering application also updates the court’s financial system automatically, eliminating manual re-entry of accounting data.

“What used to happen, especially in traffic court, was the judge would make a decision, then the person would go stand in line at the cashier while the file was brought from the courtroom to the cashier’s office,” Brown explained. “We had long lines of people waiting for their tickets to come out of the courtroom so they could pay.”

The new system improves customer service and reduces the possibility for errors that could impact court records, meeting several strategic goals Brown established for her office. The plan is to also strengthen security in Circuit Court facilities. “We plan to have security cameras on every register,” she said. “We will be able to see the client and the transaction the person is processing in real time.”

Furthermore, the new technology improves flexibility and allows the court to react quickly to changing business requirements. For instance, fee changes that used to take a month for court systems to accommodate now are accomplished in a few minutes. “In today’s environment, it’s just a simple change to a table,” Wimberly said.



And because the cashiering application simplified and standardized processes for cashiers throughout the court system, litigants will be able to file virtually any type of case at any court office. Previously, cases over a certain amount had to be filed at the downtown Chicago courthouse. “This increases our operational efficiency and better serves our customers,” Brown said. “In the downtown courthouse, we have eight different divisions. So if the lines get too long in one division, people will be able to go to a different division and still file their case.”

Solid foundation

The cashiering system is the first mission-critical application deployed on the court’s HP blade server infrastructure. Brown’s office implemented the blade servers and an HP storage area network last year in an effort to improve IT efficiency and availability.

The blade server approach allows the court to support vital functions with less computing hardware, said Bridget Dancy, Brown’s Chief Deputy Clerk of Network Services. “When this project is done, we’ll be down to three servers from 17 — and we’ll have redundant power supplies and security built into it,” she said.

The Clerk’s Office squeezes even more value from its HP blade servers by using virtualization software, which allows the IT staff to divide a single physical server into multiple virtual machines. That allows the Clerk to conduct maintenance or perform upgrades without interrupting critical services.

Brown’s team worked with System Solutions Inc. (SSI), a local HP partner and a Cook County technology contract holder, to create the new infrastructure.

“They did an assessment of how we were utilizing our servers. They looked at all 17 servers and said, ‘You’re using this one 2 percent, and this one 5 percent, etc.,’ then they proposed a solution,” Dancy said.

Challenge

- Upgrade obsolete technology throughout the Clerk's Office to improve timeliness and accuracy of record-keeping, improve customer service and strengthen efficiency.

Solution

- Replace outdated mainframe terminals with modern HP PCs and Neoware thin clients.
- Consolidate the Clerk's mainframe computing operations on the Cook County mainframe.
- Deploy HP blade servers to support new applications, such as an integrated cashing and security system.

Results

- HP PCs and Neoware thin clients give more than 2,000 staff members access to e-mail, intranet and modern office productivity software.
- Mainframe consolidation saves the Clerk's Office \$1 million annually. The cashing system and other automated applications dramatically improve efficiency and customer service.

At a glance

- **Agency:** Clerk of the Cook County, Ill., Circuit Court
- **Mission:** Create, maintain and protect official circuit court records.

"We were getting to the point, as a lot of organizations do, where every time we deployed a new application, we added a server. So we took a step back and found a better approach."

Bright future

Brown said the new blade servers will form the foundation for a range of other innovative court applications. Plans for electronic court filings and a document imaging initiative are in the works. Furthermore, the Clerk's Office is automating its records management process.

"Every time we get a new case, or have a court hearing, a file has to move. Clerk's Office staff are pulling files all day, so keeping up with all of the files is a challenge," Brown said. "We're going to bar-code every case file and scan it wherever it goes — from the record center, to the courtroom, to the judge's chambers. So we'll be able to track the file electronically wherever it goes."

Several other automation projects already are proving the soundness of Brown's approach.

The Clerk's Office implemented an automated Probate Division system several years ago, which reduced file processing time from 13 days to a single day. Furthermore, the Clerk's website offers more than 350 fillable electronic forms that citizens can print and file with the court. And an expanded voice information system provides Cook County citizens with convenient access to traffic ticket information.

Innovations such as these show that Brown was serious about keeping her campaign promises. Faced with an organization stocked with ancient computers running obsolete software, Brown pushed the Cook County Circuit Court toward 21st-century technology. Now county residents are reaping the benefits of that progress. "As Clerk of the Court, it's all about ensuring adherence to the 14th Amendment to the Constitution," said Brown. "The bottom line is equal protection under the law. Equal justice for all."

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