

Part 6: Tasks, Events, and Workflow

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Task-Oriented Interface

There are two parts to the concept of a task-oriented interface. This first concept is aimed directly at using the interface to help the user accomplish their work (footnote 1). For example, if the court clerk needs to complete a form to send to the attorney or parties participating in a case, then that form should also perform the data entry function. Another CTB article, "[Documents as a Two Way Street](#)" discusses this function in more technical detail. A second example is providing a single screen or a limited amount of navigation (such as tabs) to perform a discrete task, rather than forcing the user to navigate through a series of screens via codes or function keys.

The second part of the Task-Oriented Interface concept is the ability of the system to create and maintain an up-to-date and prioritized list of work tasks to be performed by each judge or staff member, a work queue. In a manual system, or a less functional CCMS, these lists have to be manually maintained on either a desk calendar or perhaps in a stand-alone program such as [Microsoft Outlook](#) or a "To-Do" list in Word or Excel. And if the court has paper case files, a "task list" is likely to be a group of files segregated by action date, or by task that needs to be performed, such as warrants to be issued or court-generated hearing dates to create notices. The stack of files moves from desk to desk.

But providing a task-oriented interface in a CCMS, based on the event and work flow orientation discussed in the next section below, can automatically present the list of work tasks to be accomplished that day in priority order. So instead of searching the system, or printing a report (or looking on their desk calendar or to-do list), system users should be able to simply click on the item in their task list to create the notice, assign the case, open the calendar, and perform any other function needed. And, if the person doesn't log in that day - perhaps they are ill - tasks could in turn be sent automatically to their supervisor or presiding judge. The supervisor can also use tasks lists to monitor volumes of tasks of various types, identify bottlenecks, and assign additional staff to tasks lists where more hands are needed, dynamically. Typically, each task list would be shared by two or more judges or staff members, to ensure coverage. Task lists are usually organized by task type, within roles (counter clerk, financial clerk) or sometimes across roles, depending on the size of the organization.

But how are these task lists automatically created for each user or group of users? From event triggers!

Event-Driven Workflow

Court processes are event-driven, and there are three kinds of triggers. First, external events trigger case activity. Everyone knows that courts record events in docket/registry books that have occurred in the case. More specific examples of an external event trigger are the entry of the

receipt of a document, a receipt for payment of a fine or fee, a hearing held in a case, and many, many others where an event triggers some court activity including entry into the docket/registry.

Second, actions by another user trigger case activity. As noted above, an event trigger can be a completed task such as creating a document or scheduling hearing. Another example is a counter clerk who handles a request for a bond refund; the accounting supervisor must review it and either approve or deny it, and the decision goes back to the clerk to perform it or tell why it can't be performed.

Third, an event trigger can be a change in a condition or state of a case, as when a deadline passes. Examples include a defendant failing to appear or pay a fine installment, and an attorney not filing a response to a motion pursuant to a scheduling order (which means that the court can proceed to decide the motion).

Picture: ccms 4

What occurs after one of these event triggers is a series of tasks that carries the event forward in all of the appropriate ways for the event. Workflow is automation of a business process; and after a triggering event, there are tasks in each process that complete the process – pass documents, information or tasks from one person to another – according a set of rules. Then the case waits for the next event to occur.

An analogy would be to think of such a series of tasks as being like toy “Lego Bricks.” Each task is represented by a brick. As most know, these bricks can be connected in any order and kind of sequences, depending on the goal. And the “workflow system” represents the instructions to connect the sequences or groups of bricks.

Again going back to the first point in this article, the CCMS can be use event information to identify or create the next task or set of tasks to be done according to the court rules or the case plan. The best system design allows for flexible connection of the events to the tasks based upon not only the court rules but also on the organizational structure and the needs of the judges and the local court staff. This allows the court and system to be able to change and reflect process improvements as they are implemented in the future.

Tasks and Events as Workload Measures

In addition, a task/ event approach allows for better and more accurate measurement of court work load. The standard procedure in weighted caseload assessments uses subjective estimates of time spent during a workday doing fairly broadly-defined categories of work. Alternatively, counting events as work performed by judges or staff, and tasks for future work, can provide a much more accurate view of the type and amount of work performed. Tasks and events could also be assigned “weights” depending on the amount time it took or is projected to take to perform the work.

In August, 2004, the United States Federal Judicial Center reported that they had completed their new case weighting evaluation system based on event measurement. They Reported in their newsletter, The Third Branch:

“The event-based method has several advantages: the FJC was able to complete its study in less time than the previous study of case weights, future updating will be easier, and, as new types of civil and criminal filings develop, the method allows greater flexibility in developing case weights for them.”