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L.A. County Public Defender Upgrades Case Management System With AWS

The office's first CIO has embraced digital transformation to reinvent record-keeping procedures.

by Erin Brereton X

Erin Brereton has written about technology, business and other topics for more than 50 magazines, newspapers and online publications.

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When Mohammed Al Rawi joined the Los Angeles County Public Defender's Office as its first CIO in 2019, reducing the organization's paper use and making case-related information easier to access were central goals.

What Al Rawi found, however, was a variety of legacy systems — including what he describes as COBOL programming-based green screens dating back to the 1960s — being used to manage case-related information.

So, the public defender's office began to investigate available options for a case management system. Beyond needing to digitize 160 million records and roughly 100,000 boxes of paper containing relevant case information, it also had to determine a way to handle documents that the office regularly receives from justice system partners such as law enforcement agencies — which could involve additional physical files.

"We work with many justice agencies that still provide information in paper form; thousands of documents are physically delivered to us," Al Rawi says. "You can transform your organization, but what do you do about external sources of analog information?"

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Automation Converts Paper Files to Digital Files

Initially, the Los Angeles County Public Defender's Office considered bringing on data entry staff to key the information into a central system, but it realized that hiring people to fill those roles would be a considerable undertaking.

"When we did the math, we found it would take an average of 24 minutes per case to input relevant information from a police report," Al Rawi says. "We receive documents from 99 arresting agencies. It's a massive county; we have 10 million residents. We would have needed to place dozens of data entry staff at over 30 locations across the county."

The public defender's office instead began to examine tech-based alternatives that would enable it to convert paper to digital files.

After speaking with several vendors and conducting a proof-of-concept pilot with Amazon Web Services, Al Rawi says, it decided to use three of the company's solutions: Amazon Textract for document intake; Amazon Comprehend, a natural language processing service that can identify insights and relationships within text via machine learning; and Amazon S3, AWS's cloud object storage service.

Together, the solutions have helped the Los Angeles County Public Defender's Office process the large volume of documents and reports from multiple agencies, says Kim Majerus, AWS vice president for U.S. public sector education, and state and local government. Attorneys can now quickly access digitized case-related information instead of having to lug reams of paper to court.

"In government, specifically, we see a lot of legacy systems," Majerus says. "The leadership at the public defender's office really saw the opportunity to streamline and be more efficient. It does provide the defender — the actual employee of LA County — with a more agile environment; instead of looking for something, it's right at their fingertips. It's easier to extract the information so they can best support each case."

> " It knows which page of the document is relevant for which case."
>
> **Mohammed Al Rawi, Los Angeles County Public Defender's Office CIO**

Artificial Intelligence Sorts and Files Documents

HP scanners at essentially every office location were programmed with QR codes that can be attached to a document when an attorney or support staff member scans it. The system automatically identifies the case, the document type and which folder it needs to be routed to.

Because documents from an arresting agency generally have consistent types of information, the AWS-based system is able use artificial intelligence to identify and extract each section within a page. Machine learning capabilities help the process become more nuanced and accurate the more it's performed, Al Rawi says.

"They have created this solution that identifies which justice agency is the source of the document," he says. "It knows which page of the document is relevant for which case and what other summaries need to be extracted. All of that will be aggregated and then input as a draft."

The system required essentially no new major software or hardware to implement, Majerus says.

"That's the beauty, really, of cloud," she says. "All anybody in that office really needed was a decent connection to the internet."

Although the data is stored temporarily in Amazon S3, the public defender's office retains control over it, and nothing is permanently stored outside of its case management system.

"Of course, the data is encrypted at rest and during transmittal," Al Rawi says. "It checks off a lot of the standards we want to follow to protect our records."

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Employees Find New Case Management System Easy to Use

Although the AWS-based system is primarily automated, each item isn't stored as a record until a human reviews it. The entire process takes less time than manually keying the information into the system would, Al Rawi says.

"The user, whether it's an attorney, a paralegal or legal office support staff, will see a notification that a document was processed," he says. "The AI will highlight the documents that information was extracted from. The user then quickly compares and checks the accuracy of the information. That 24 minutes of data entry time can be reduced to literally a minute or less, depending on how clear the provided documents are."

The Los Angeles County Public Defender's Office started implementing the case management system in October 2020, rolling out a module for cases involving adults, the largest population it serves. The system has gone through a few iterations to enhance the user experience, but Al Rawi says the implementation has gone well overall.

"It's very intuitive," he says. "Right now, it's as if you're looking at a piece of paper, but it's actually on the screen, with some highlights to tell you what you're comparing. You validate each one and can just hit submit, and it will create multiple records from a document that can be hundreds of pages."

Leveraging cloud-based resources has helped the public defender's office facilitate efficient data access, and the move to a more digitized system has positioned the office to make future tech enhancements, Al Rawi says.

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