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Legal technology for small law firms: where to begin

Small and mid-sized Indian law firms can gain the most from technology. A simple, low-cost plan covering files, time, billing, research and security.

Technology in law is often presented as something for large firms with large budgets. In truth the smallest practices have the most to gain. A few well-chosen tools can give a five-lawyer firm the organisation of a much bigger one.

Start with the problem

Before buying anything, list what goes wrong. Common answers are: files cannot be found, hearing dates are missed, time is not recorded, invoices go out late and knowledge leaves with people.

The essentials, in order

1. Document management. Store every file in one secure, backed-up location with a consistent folder and naming system. Scan paper as it arrives. This single step changes how a firm works.

2. Calendar and case tracking. One shared diary for hearing dates, limitation periods and deadlines, with reminders. Link it to court case-status services where possible.

3. Time and billing. Record time daily, even for fixed-fee work. Generate invoices from the record. Track what is unpaid.

4. Research. A subscription to a reliable legal database, used properly, repays itself quickly.

5. Templates and precedents. Collect the firm's best drafts in a library that everyone uses and improves.

6. Communication. Firm e-mail accounts on the firm's own domain. Secure sharing of documents with clients.

7. Security. Strong passwords, multi-factor authentication, encrypted devices and regular backups.

Then consider

- e-signature and document automation for standard paperwork.
- Client portals for sharing progress.
- AI tools for research and first drafts, under a clear policy.
- Video-conferencing facilities for virtual hearings.

How to choose tools

- Prefer simple tools that people will actually use.
- Check where data is stored and who can access it.
- Make sure you can export your data if you leave.
- Start with one team or one process.
- Ask peers what works for them.

People before software

Technology fails when people are not trained or when seniors ignore it. Appoint one person to own each system. Train clerks and juniors, who do most of the daily work. Partners must use it too.

Counting the return

Measure three things before and after: time spent searching for documents, days between completing work and sending the invoice, and missed or last-minute deadlines.

The wider gain

Much of India's legal market is unorganised. Technology is the quickest and cheapest route from informal practice to a professionally run firm. It also makes a practice more attractive to young lawyers and to corporate clients.

No firm is too small to be well organised. Begin with the files.

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