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Review of NetDocuments

By Joshua Stein

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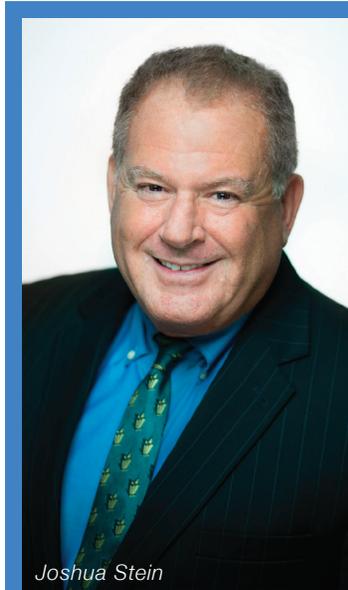
Fifteen years is a long time for anything, especially the use of a product. In this issue of SmallLaw, real-estate lawyer Joshua Stein reviews NetDocuments as only a 15-year veteran can. You'll learn how he uses this cloud document management software to organize, edit, and collaborate on documents, which features he relies on the most, and whether he recommends it for small law firms in the market for such software.

I use the NetDocuments document management system as the backbone of my transactional commercial real estate practice. Since opening my practice in August 2010, I've used NetDocuments to create and store all documents that I intend to edit. And for about 10 years before that, I used NetDocuments on a "free trial" basis to keep track of some personal documents and projects. This may make me one of the most long-standing current users of NetDocuments.

I've never rigorously compared NetDocuments against other products. I've been happy enough with NetDocuments for 15 years that I haven't wanted to explore alternatives. At this point, my NetDocuments installation holds thousands of documents. So maybe I'm stuck with it for the rest of my professional life!

Dashboard and Organization

The NetDocuments home screen gives me immediate access to a handful of documents I edit regularly, such as a list of assignments for my staff, a list of assignments for my computer consultant, my office procedures manual (don't ask) and my template to create cover notes for future model documents.



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Every NetDocuments screen also displays a list of my document folders. If I click on the name of a folder, it opens and shows me all the documents within the folder. And I can create subfolders within folders.

Drafting and Editing Documents

To edit a document from NetDocuments in Word, I click on the name of the document and NetDocuments launches Word, opens the document and lets me start editing. When I am done, I can close out and save the edited document, or I can tell NetDocuments to create and save a new version of the document. The latter option opens a screen that lets me add a useful description of the new version, beyond just the date it was created.

NetDocuments integrates the redlining process so that I can easily order suitable redlines, send distributions and keep everything

straight. Still, each redlining and distribution project takes a few minutes to accomplish — potentially much longer for multiple documents.

To avoid wasting that time, I developed a form that lets me set up standardized instructions for redlining and distribution. This way, my staff does the work — easily accomplished because everyone in the office has easy access to all our pending work through NetDocuments. Often I will want to see how the redlined document looks before I send it out. That's one of the options I can request when I set up the redlining and distribution project using my standardized form. My staff will also create appropriate "record" versions and "revision" versions in NetDocuments so that we have no problem figuring out our "starting point" for future redlines. This process does not require traditional legal

secretaries. Instead, I hire smart recent college graduates who stay with me for three months to three years while they figure out what they want to do when they grow up.

Redundancy and Security

Any online document management system offers the huge and fundamental advantage of allowing any lawyer or non-lawyer on my team to edit any document anywhere, as long as they are connected to the Internet. Documents reside in a secure repository with redundancy and encryption. To my knowledge, NetDocuments has not suffered any security breach.

In its ordinary operation, NetDocuments creates a local “shadow” or “echo” copy of any file being edited, and then uploads that copy back to the Internet after the user finishes editing. One can control how long NetDocuments saves those shadow copies, and where.

I’ve used this flexibility to create [Dropbox](#) folders to store shadow copies. This serves two purposes. First, it’s a rudimentary backup system so I can always get immediate access to recently-edited files if I lose my Internet connection. Second, if I watch what’s happening in those shadow folders I know what my staff is working on. (Although I continue to use Dropbox for this function, I’ve eliminated most of my other business-related use of Dropbox because of problems I described earlier this year in *TL Serendipity*. See [My Dropbox Misadventures and Search for a Replacement](#).)

Internal and External Collaboration

Beta versions of NetDocuments allow multiple users to [co-edit the same document simultaneously](#), without tripping over each other or creating bogus new versions

and confusion. I have not tested this feature, as I am happy with NetDocuments the way I have used it, with incremental improvements, for 15 years. The “simultaneous editing” feature requires an Office 365 subscription, which I don’t currently have.

If I expect to not have an Internet connection (for example on an airplane or at a house in Western Marin County “off the grid”), I can temporarily check out documents from NetDocuments in a way that will block other users from editing them. Once I finish my work, I can check the documents back in.

A minor quibble with NetDocuments: it uses the verb “check out” to refer to the type of “checking out” that I just described, as well as a more routine checking out of a document to edit it while connected to the Internet. Another minor quibble lies in the “Created by” and “Modified by” sections of the version description. When one of my users creates a new version of a document ready to edit, the “Created by” field in the version description indicates the time we created the version, but the “Modified by” field indicates the time when the last version was modified. This results in a “Modified by” date and time that predates the “Created by” date and time — most peculiar. This anomaly creates confusion if we are trying to maintain proper records of versions.

Finally, a major quibble: NetDocuments lacks a function for an administrator to obtain a complete list of all documents that all users have checked out (either for routine editing or to take on airplanes) but not yet returned. This makes it hard for the administrator to perform housekeeping and clean up messes before they happen.

If I want to share a document with another NetDocuments user in my

group, I can send them a link to that document. If they click on the link, the document opens in Word. They can edit and then save. I have the option of forcing the creation of new versions every time someone edits a document, but I don’t often do this.

To share a document outside my NetDocuments group, I have two choices. First, NetDocuments and Outlook are integrated in a way that lets me quickly and easily attach a document from NetDocuments when I’m using Outlook. Second, I can give an outside user a Read-Only link so they can open the document themselves locally. At my option, they will see either a particular version of the document (i.e., exactly how the document looked at a certain moment) or the most recent version with all the latest changes (i.e., an up to the minute edited version).

Within my office, I can control who can see what, by setting up groups and allowing only particular groups to see any particular folder or group of folders. This is one of many NetDocuments features that I don’t fully use. Another consists of the ability to use NetDocuments as a filing system for email messages. I worry that if I file individual email messages one at a time in NetDocuments or any other repository, I will have no time left to do legal work. So I maintain entirely unsorted archival files for all email in Outlook, using [NEO](#) (Nelson Email Organizer) and [X1](#) to search email when necessary.

Odds and Ends

In addition to Word documents and email, NetDocuments can manage Excel files and PDF files. I don’t use NetDocuments as a filing system for static documents in any format. Instead, I keep those on a file server in folders for each client with a standard folder structure for each matter.

To work best, NetDocuments requires use of Internet Explorer, which I find shocking given all the changes that have occurred in the world of browsers. Other browsers usually work but not very well. I don't get full functionality and I have to pay more attention to the mechanics of downloading and uploading documents. I've had the same experience when I've tried to run NetDocuments on my smartphone, but I don't

really want to edit documents on my smartphone so I don't care. The amazing thing may be that NetDocuments works at all in a mobile browser.

TechnoScore

Overall, NetDocuments has done a great job for me in managing all my documents for a very long time. It's easy for my attorneys and staff to learn. It works reliably and well. I've been very happy with it. I give it an A-.



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Joshua Stein is one of the leading commercial real estate lawyers in the US and has been using computers for all his legal work since 1982, when he bought his first Kaypro II. He has written hundreds of articles on commercial real estate and over a dozen on the use of computers in law practice.

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