

Court Case Study: 13th Circuit Court

“Our Court has not only experienced an increase in productivity as digital documents move quickly among relevant staff, but we have realized hard dollar cost savings in everything from paper to toner to postage.”

— **Philip Rodgers**
Retired Chief Judge,
13th Circuit Court

The Customer

In scenic northwest Michigan lie the neighboring counties of Grand Traverse, Leelanau and Antrim. A favored weekend retreat and vacation destination for many lower-Michigan residents, the three counties have experienced double-digit population growth for more than two decades, bucking the trend of the rest of the state, which has seen continued population decline. The non-urban, tri-county area currently counts a combined population of 186,000 residents.

The Challenge

Beyond the area's growing population, its 13th Circuit Court has also experienced a growing issue with the number of paper court files accumulated within the three-county court system. Tracking and managing files that were physically kept in three geographic locations had become time-consuming and inefficient, and sharing files among the courts made immediate access to them virtually impossible. Once in hand, the files were often a mass of papers that judges found too cumbersome to use.

By 2010, the Court's leaders had decided that the solution to these issues was a fully electronic court. They envisioned a paper-on-demand court where digital files replaced paper and organization replaced disarray. They knew that attaining this goal would require a versatile, powerful document management system.

“We needed to increase the court's efficiency and transparency and have a solution in place that people could understand and use efficiently, said Philip Rodgers (ret), then Chief Judge in the 13th Circuit Court. Judge Rodgers and his peers at the courts also understood that the ability of lawyers and parties to eFile and eSign documents is a “significant part of a digital court.”

With these goals in mind, the 13th Circuit Court, in conjunction with the county's IT departments, administrators and commissioners set about selecting the necessary tools and a vendor to establish a paper-on-demand court. In 2011, following the recommendation of Grand Traverse County, which was familiar with the OnBase® document management system, ImageSoft was chosen to implement its JusticeTech solution powered by OnBase and augmented with TrueFiling electronic filing.

The Process

From the start, it was a complex project involving three county clerks, three county commissions, three county IT departments, three staffs and the local Bar Association. And from the start, Judge Rodgers and his team worked judiciously to garner broad-based support from all the key stakeholders.

Together they established a realistic budget, revenue stream and amortization period for the project and ironed out a cost-sharing agreement among the three counties. With these key elements in place, the implementation of the OnBase document management system began. The Friend of the Court (Family Court), where literally thousands of non-public paper files were kept, was deemed the best place to begin. Case managers and case assistants were assigned the task of culling the files. All unnecessary documents were shredded, and the remaining critical documents were scanned by a third-party vendor and saved to a database.

Next came the job of digitally mapping the court staff's existing workflow. This process was an important step, according to Judge Rodgers who deemed it, "A once-in-a-generation opportunity to evaluate current practices for change and to build new efficiencies into the system."

With the digital mapping completed, system testing and staff training soon got underway, and in November 2011, the OnBase go-live was a reality. Shortly thereafter, the court set about adding TrueFiling, the ImageSoft Web-based eFiling solution, and chose civil and negligence case codes as the starting point.

The Success

Today, documents and files are instantly accessible 24-hours a day, seven days a week. What's more, tabbed and indexed files make the data searchable and easy to find and use. The need to physically transport files is now a thing of the past. "We're no longer chasing around three counties searching for files," said Judge Rodgers.

Transparency and efficiency are vastly improved. Digital files and workflow enable the work to move seamlessly through the system – from case assistant to case manager, to the Friend of the Court, referees and judges – without wasted time or lost documents, simplifying and speeding the process.

Electronic filing too has not only provided efficiencies, but a new revenue stream for the counties to share. When documents arrive via TrueFiling, they are approved or rejected (with explanation). Then, once the filer's credit card fee is processed, the documents are served on all parties of record. Attorneys are getting nearly instantaneous response via TrueFiling. "It's an amazing increase of efficiency," said Judge Rodgers. And, with just two case codes alone, the 13th Circuit Court is trending towards revenue of approximately \$35,000 annually.

Hard savings from office supplies, such as paper, envelopes, postage and toner, and equipment costs and maintenance have also been substantial. The court has experienced a 39% decrease in such costs.

But the most significant savings has been in reduced labor. With efficiencies from OnBase and TrueFiling, the Court has been able to handle its workload with fewer staff. The savings to the Court in reduced wages and benefits is expected to be in excess of \$110,000 annually.

These savings, combined with annual revenue generated by TrueFiling, will result in the project paying for itself two years sooner than planned.

13th Circuit Court

The Challenges

- Difficulty tracking and managing files that were physically kept in three locations
- No immediate access to files
- Sharing files was extremely challenging
- Paper files were too cumbersome for judges to use

The Results

- Greatly improved transparency and efficiency
- Reduced costs of office supplies and equipment by 39%
- Reduced labor costs in excess of \$110,000 annually
- Court files are instantly accessible 24/7 and easily shared
- No need to physically transport files from county to county, saving time and transport costs
- TrueFiling created a new revenue stream of approximately \$35,000 per year (with just two case codes)
- Project is expected to amortize two years sooner than planned
- Judges hear cases at the bench using an electronic case file