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Law Firm Profits From Custom App, Eyes New Business

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Law Technology News

10-19-2011

Fort Lauderdale, Fla.-based [LaVan & Neidenberg](#) specializes in social security disability, veterans' disability compensation, and long-term disability cases. A year after it opened in 2004, it had three employees and 600 clients. Today it has 120 employees, including a dozen full-time attorneys plus some offsite help, and 20,000 clients, said the firm's founding partner and president, Ken LaVan, at an IBM event in New York Tuesday showcasing small business partners.

Speaking with LaVan at the event, it seems likely that an entrepreneurial spirit and some hard work played roles in the firm's growth, including an 80 percent surge in gross revenue, from \$5 million last year to \$9 million this year. But as both LaVan and IBM say, it has also been about a small business emphasizing innovative technology to compete and grow despite limited resources.

For LaVan & Neidenberg, that has taken the form of working with IBM partner [GBS](#) (Group Business Software) to develop the law firm's EZ Claim application, which integrates and customizes Lotus Notes and Domino collaboration software, IBM Symphony desktop productivity suite, and IBM Sametime instant messaging. The system analyzes and files claims 66 percent faster than the firm's previous methods, according to IBM, which calls this type of configuration "[social software](#)." LaVan's firm chose the IBM suite over Microsoft Exchange and Microsoft Dynamics CRM, he said.

IBM's day-long event was the company's push to clarify its midmarket strategy, which includes partnering with small businesses (fewer than 1,000 employees) and the "trusted local partners" on whom those businesses depend. In addition to Microsoft, its competitors include Hewlett-Packard, Dell, SAP, and Oracle.

"Back when we were up to 40 employees and 5,000 clients [2009], we had layers of applications," LaVan told the audience during a panel discussion. "It was tough to train people ... plus the veterans' benefits claims were complex. That's when we said we need to condense -- to use sophisticated workflows and analytics to do that."

The first module the firm launched was an intake wizard that streamlined and normalized a formerly manual process, posing questions and providing guidance to arrive at decisions of client eligibility, needs, and next steps, LaVan said. He added that the firm's client base swelled about 60 percent in the first month of the module's use.

Later, efficiencies took new forms. "It's just a ton of paperwork we have to keep giving the government," LaVan said during a break in the event. "With our app, it's a very systematic approach. We request thousands of medical records per month. We systematically create case files with workflow views that tell each user what to do and when."

LaVan credited EZ Claim as a reason the firm can maintain a 10-to-1 support employee-to-attorney ratio, with the staff of paralegals, case analysts, customer service representatives, and just two IT workers operating more like a mainstream business than a typical law firm. "We have four times the clients but just three times the staff now because of the analytics and workflows," he said.

What's next for LaVan & Neidenberg and EZ Claim? In addition to growing the firm to 250 employees in 3 to 5 years, LaVan said a new business might be farming out the software system, along with business consulting services on how to use it, to other law firms and even other industries, such as insurance. That could take place after a marketing partner and a cloud storage provider (such as IBM) are secured, he said, allowing him to remain focused on the law firm.

"Don't spend 10,000 hours developing the app like I did," LaVan had exclaimed during the panel discussion. "Here's the box, here's the 10,000 hours -- now spend 500 hours with your partner customizing it to [practices such as] wills and trusts."