Project Portfolio

Software Simplified /
Legal Support Simplified LLC

MS Access Databases
For
Law Firms / Legal Departments

The projects described herein are those that I thought would be most representative of the types of projects that would be useful to the "average" law firm. We have done others, but they are very specific to the companies for which they were created. The three projects that follow are representative of the type of work we have done, in general. In each, I have tried to point out those key features that are uniquely useful to a particular application.

We have been working with MS Access for years and are very experienced with versions Access 2.0, Access 97 Access 2000 and Access 2002.

Project Portfolio

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Client/Payment Tracking - Bankruptcy Firm

Overview

The law firm wanted to be able to more efficiently track client/case data, especially payments. They intended to use the database for collections, mailings, historical information and generally tracking cases. They used a separate piece of software (BestCase Bankruptcy) designed specifically for managing bankruptcy data to track case progress and generate legal documents.

Users

Data was primarily entered by a clerical employee. She was responsible for entering cases as they came in, then updating them with payments as they occurred.

A paralegal used the reports generated to track receipts and perform collections.

The attorneys used the contact data to handle calls and make notes about correspondence and communications.

Software

The database was created using MS Access 97. I did a limited amount of coding to manage payment data. The majority of the "work" of the database is performed through queries and macros.

The database consists of 5 tables, 17 queries, 14 forms/subforms, 19 reports, 4 macros and a switchboard.

Litigation Docket - Corporate Legal Department

Overview

The legal department of a corporate headquarters wanted a means of tracking litigation for multiple corporate entities. They needed to keep up with insurance coverage, case calendars, financial data, settlement talks, etc. They had been trying to track this information using a massive spreadsheet program, but found that they were reentering duplicate data on multiple cases, often inconsistently. Also, they had no efficient means of tracking the costs, actual and forecasted, associated with each case. They were retyping the same information on multiple documents and needed a central storage base from which all the pertinent information could be accessed and reported on either directly or through mail merges (using MS Word).

Users

Data was entered by secretaries and paralegals. It was updated as case status changed and additional information became available.

Paralegals and attorneys used the reports generated to track due dates and deadlines as well as costs. They also used the data to obtain contact and follow-up information and keep notes on tasks related to the proceedings.

Software

The database was created using MS Access 97. As in the prior example, the majority of the "work" of the database is performed through queries and macros.

The database consists of 10 tables, 7 queries, 13 forms/subforms, 10 reports and 15 macros.

Agreement Records - Corporate Legal Department

Overview

The legal department of a corporate headquarters wanted a means of maintaining and archiving agreement/contract records. They needed to know when contracts were up for renewal, be able to update parties to a contract as corporate entities merged or were acquired or divested, keep track of which department the agreements were created for. They also needed to be able to quickly locate physical documents, whether they were active or archived.

The database was created in tandem with the filing system so that they could be used together to help streamline the department. This database is a very simple, yet effective, data storage and access solution.

Users

Data was entered by secretaries as new documents were created and stored. It was updated as agreements went from temporary (in revision stage) to active (fully executed) to archived (expired or terminated).

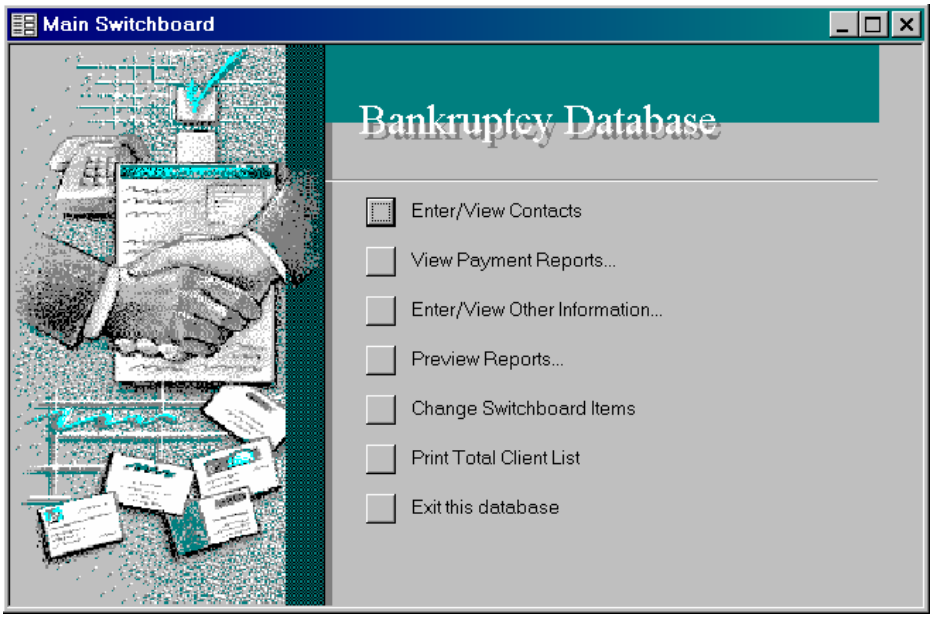
Secretaries and paralegals used the information to quickly locate files and generate reports on when contracts were up for review or renewal, had expired, or required follow-up.

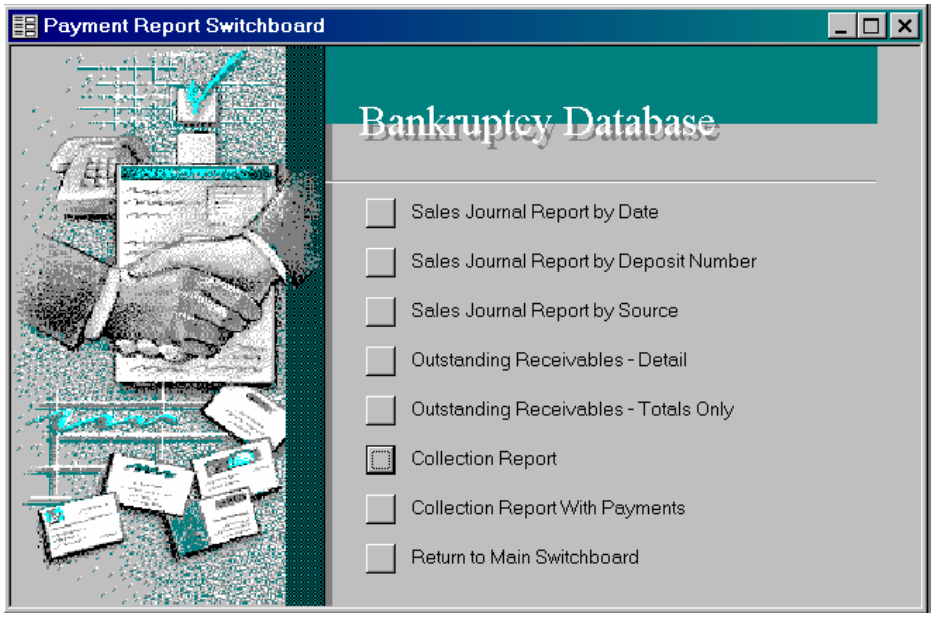
Software

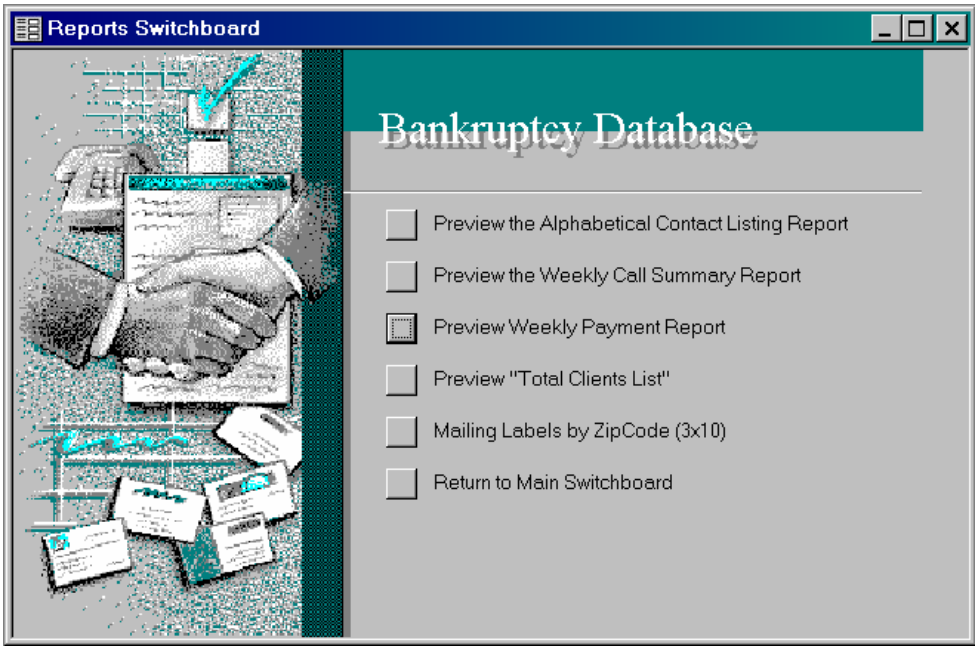
The database was created using MS Access 97 and consists of 8 tables, 5 queries, 9 forms/subforms, 6 reports, 4 macros and a switchboard.

Client/Payment Tracking - Bankruptcy Firm

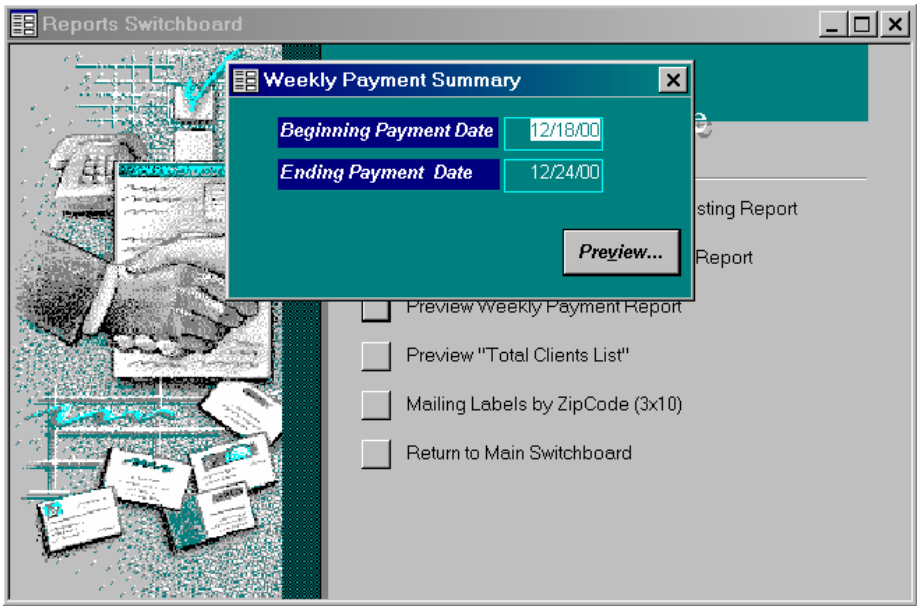
Navigation through the various forms and reports was facilitated by a series of “switchboards,” allowing the users to easily access the information they needed without having to know where the data was stored or how it was accessed:



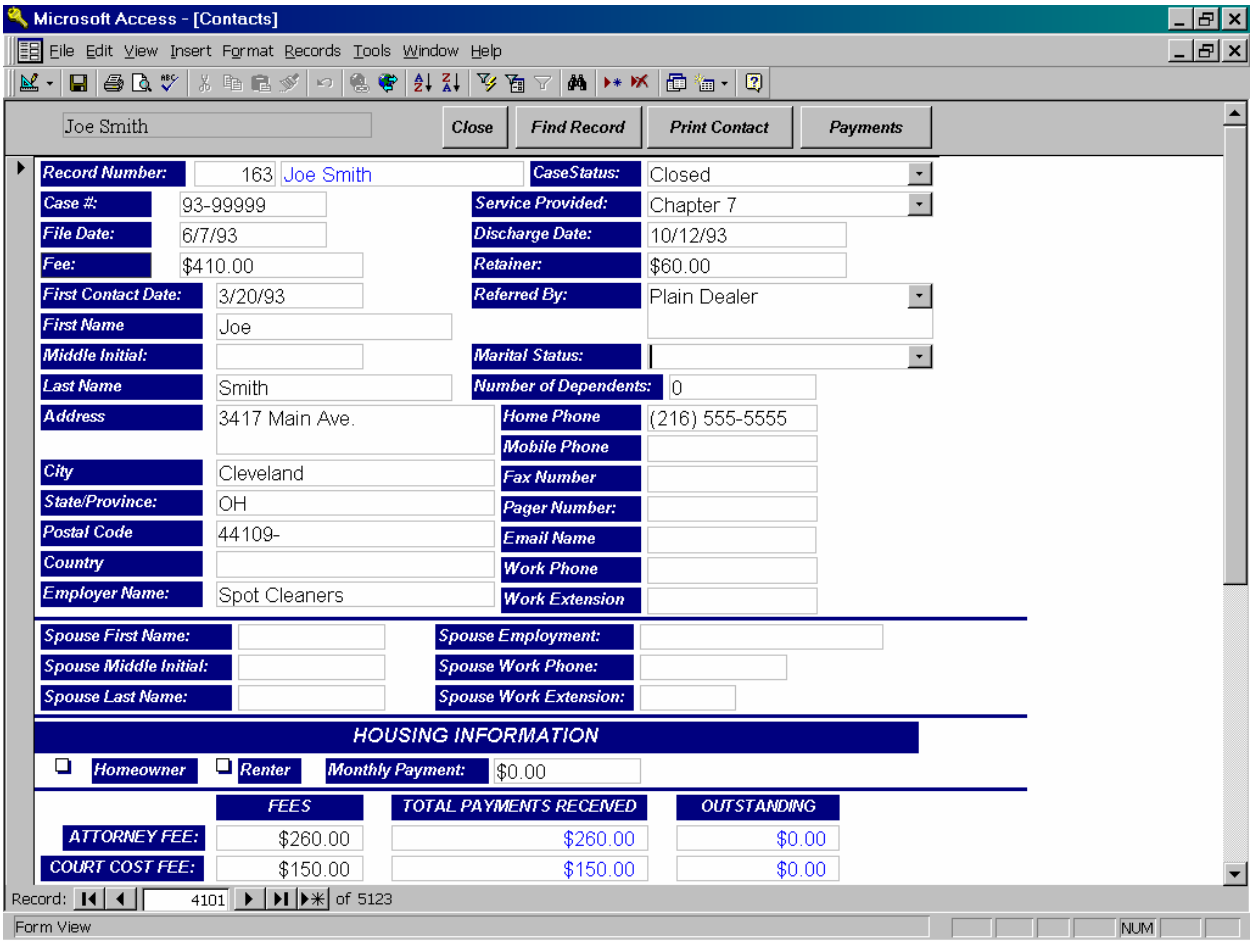




Some reports, like the “Weekly Payment Report,” required input from the user in order to run. For the “Weekly Payment Report,” when the user clicked the switchboard button, they would be prompted to enter a range of dates before the report would run. The current week would automatically be the default, but the user was free to change these dates:



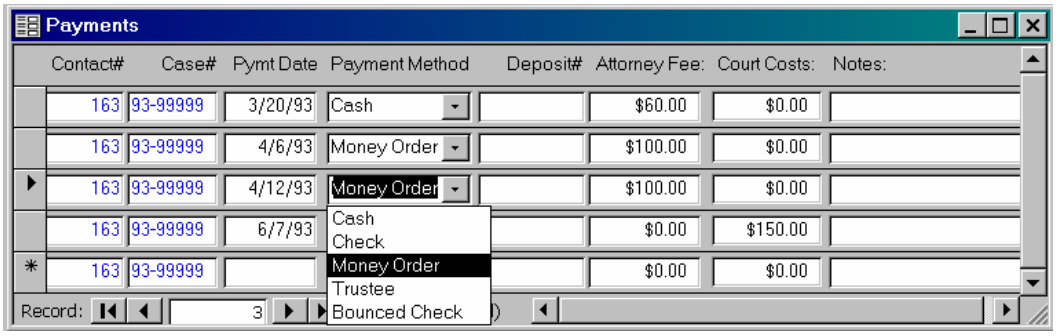
In other instances, clicking a switchboard button would take the user to a data entry / lookup screen.



A few notes regarding this screen:

First, not only does it provide a place to enter data, it also has buttons that allow other functions to be accomplished without leaving the data entry screen (print contact data sheet, enter payments) in the upper portion of the screen. This saved time for the person entering the data because she did not need to go back to a switchboard to do tasks commonly associated with entering new clients. She could do them “on the fly.”

Second, this screen provided payment information that wasn’t actually entered here, but was useful to the attorneys who might pull up the record while on the phone with a client (bottom of screen). The payment information was entered by a clerical employee as payments were received, and this form automatically calculated how much had been received and the outstanding balance remaining. A view of the payment entry form is on the next page:



As you can see on the above payment form, I make use of drop-down lists wherever it makes sense and is likely to save the user time when entering data. It also helps inexperienced users know what type of information is expected in those fields.

The following report is a sample of one of the reports created to facilitate collection efforts:

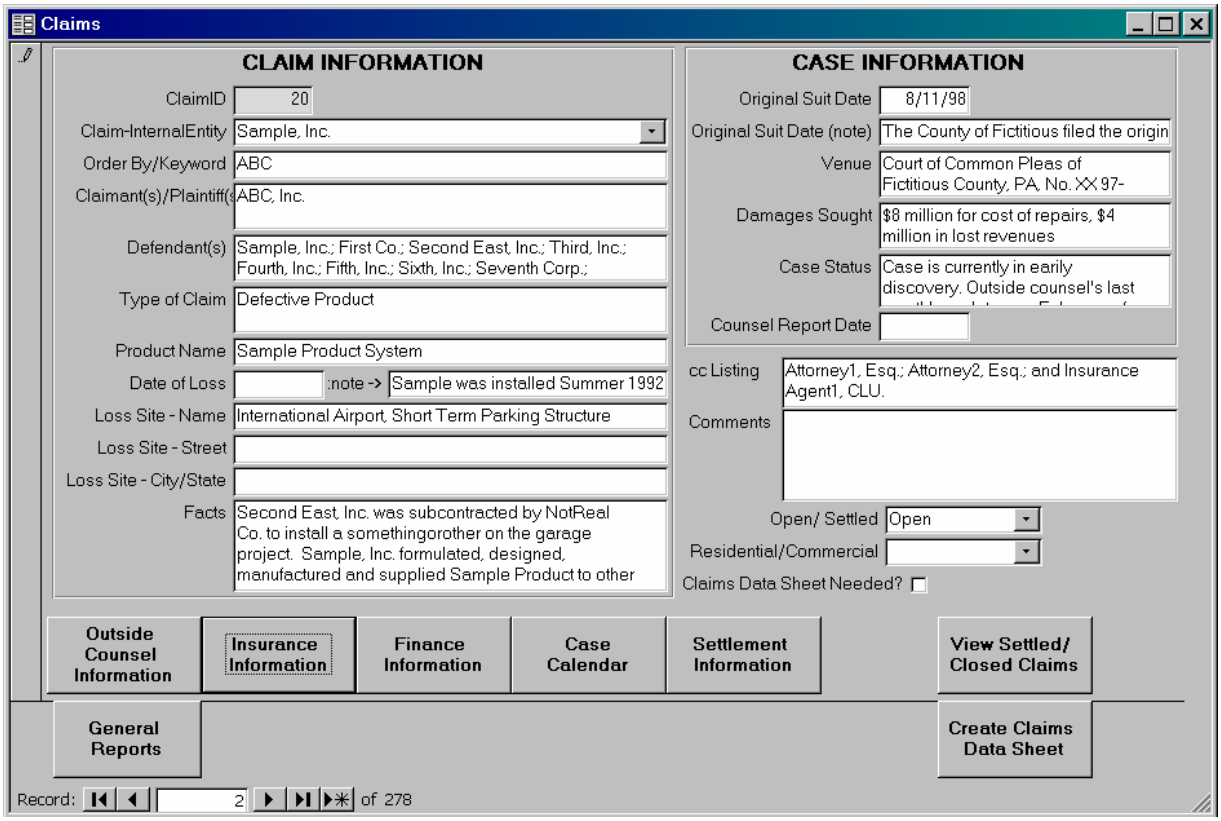
Collection Report with Payments

Name	Work #	Ext.	Home #	Attorney Fee Billed	Court Costs Billed	AttorneyFee Outstanding	CourtCosts Outstanding
			Pymt Date	AttorneyFee	CourtCosts		
				Billed:	Billed:		
466 JOHN DOE			(216) 555-5556	$700.00	$150.00	**$350.00**	**$150.00**
				Paid:	Paid:		
				$300.00	$0.00		
			11/23/92	$50.00	$0.00		
			Total Payments Made By DOE (2 payments)	**$350.00**	**$0.00**		
				Billed:	Billed:		
470 JAMES JONES	(216) 555-5558		(216) 555-5557	$430.00	$160.00	**$290.00**	**$160.00**
				Paid:	Paid:		
			7/9/94	$40.00	$0.00		
			7/14/94	$100.00	$0.00		
			Total Payments Made By JONES (2 payments)	**$140.00**	**$0.00**		
				Billed:	Billed:		
471 MICHAEL SMITH			(216) 555-5560	$260.00	$150.00	**$200.00**	**$150.00**
				Paid:	Paid:		
			5/30/92	$60.00	$0.00		
			Total Payments Made By SMITH (1 payment)	**$60.00**	**$0.00**		

There is much more to this database, but the preceding screens should serve to give you an idea of the scope and function of the project.

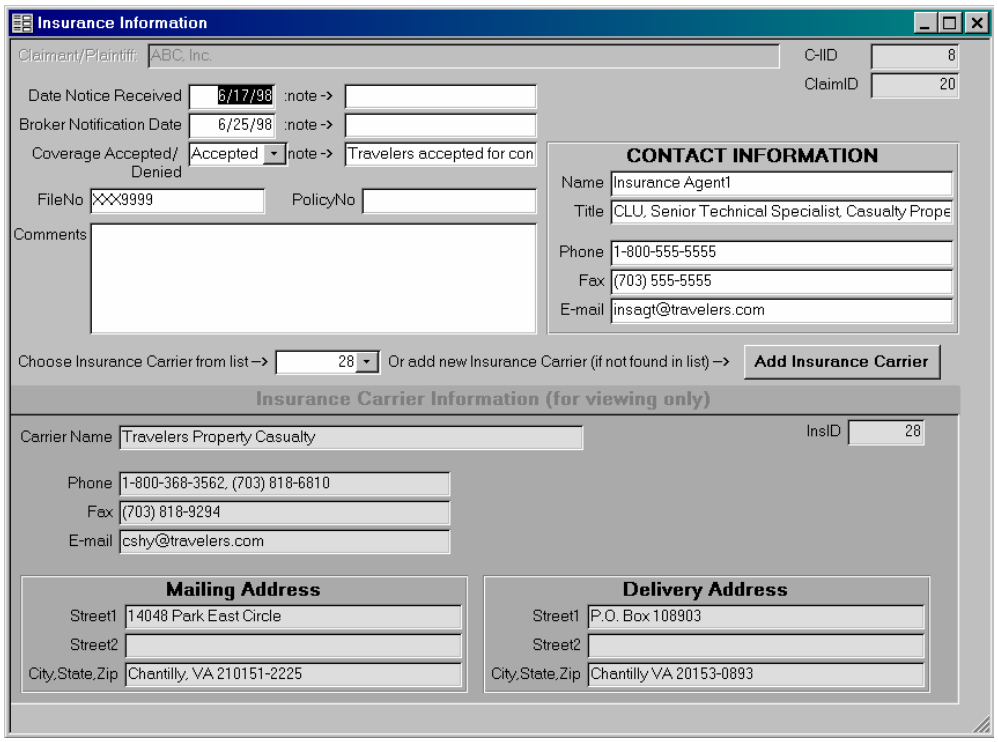
Litigation Docket - Corporate Legal Department

This database does not use a switchboard because the navigation is performed using buttons located on the main data entry screen:

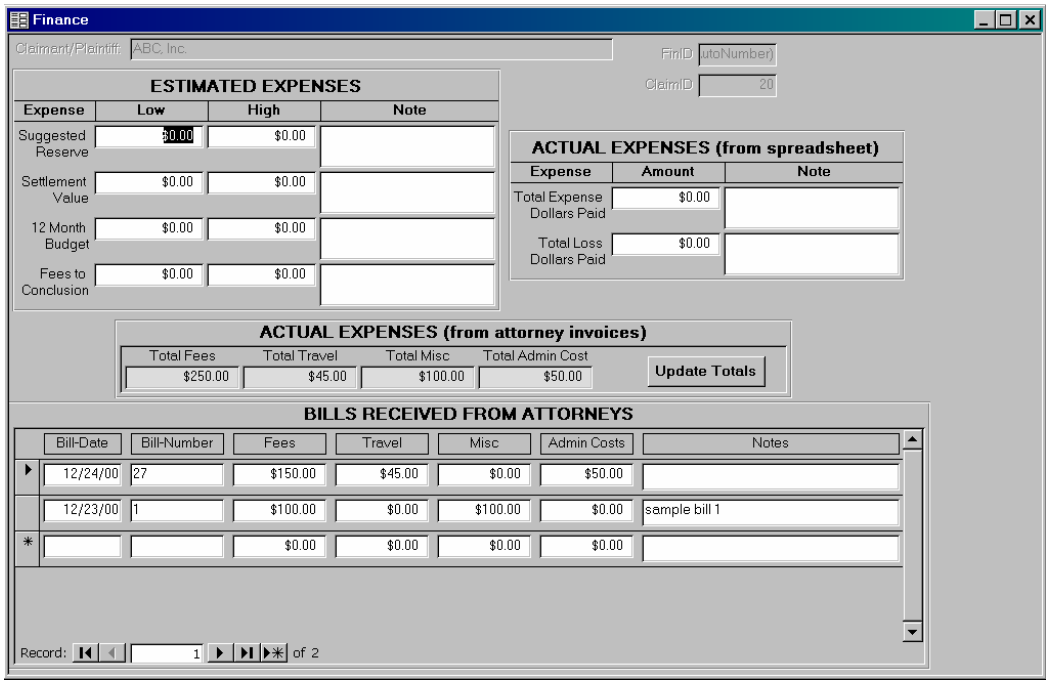


Clicking the buttons in the lower portion of the screen will bring up subsidiary forms or reports pertaining to the claim information currently being viewed.

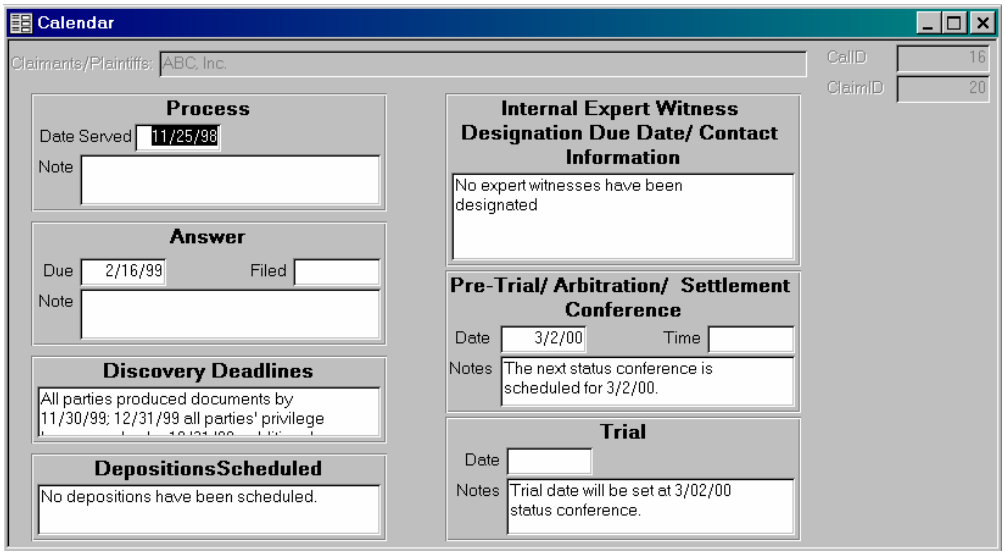
In the original spreadsheet, there were a number of records pertaining to outside counsel and insurance where most of the information was duplicated from other records with minor differences (for example, same firm as used in 20 other cases, but different attorney). For this reason, the forms used to enter this information have subforms which can pull up existing law firm or insurance company information. The subform allows the user to verify that it is, in fact, the same company (not just a company with the same name). A drop down list is used to choose a company and the information is checked. If a new firm or insurance company is needed, it can be entered "on the fly" by clicking the "Add Insurance Carrier" button (or Law Firm, as the case may be). The contact information that differs from case to case, like insurance agent or attorney, is entered separately for each case:



The Finance Information form consists of a form and two subforms. The subforms allow the user to enter attorney fees as the bills are received and keep a running tally of the actual expenses billed to date.



The Case Calendar allows entry of critical dates so that reports can be run periodically to ensure that crucial deadlines are not overlooked:



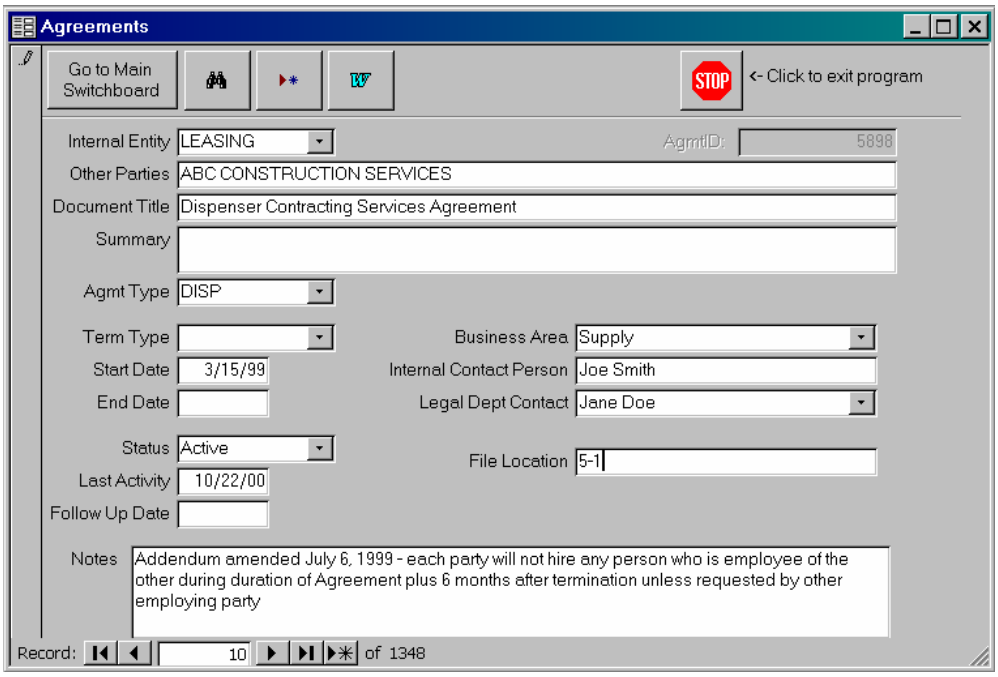
A “Claims Data Sheet” could be quickly created from the information contained in the record. This sheet was placed in the paper file so that anyone reviewing the file could get a quick overview of the case without having to sift through a lot of documentation.

ABC, Inc.

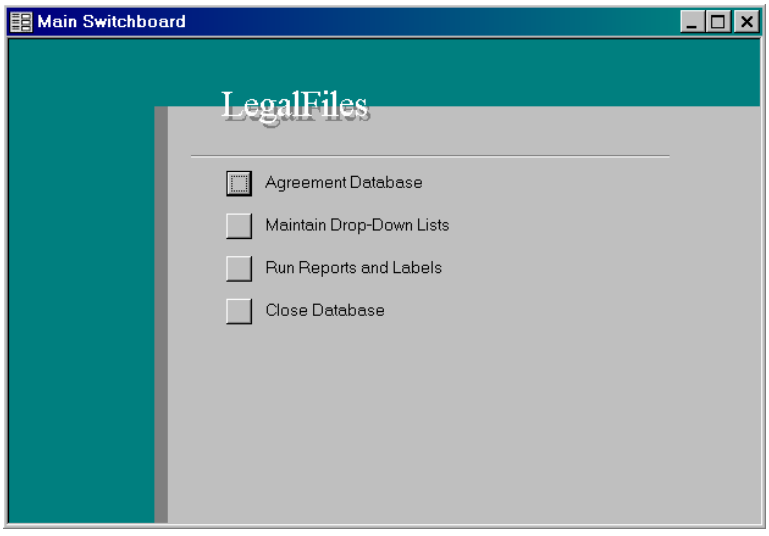
Plaintiff(s):	ABC, Inc.
Defendant(s):	Sample, Inc.; First Co.; Second East, Inc.; Third, Inc.; Fourth, Inc.; Fifth, Inc.; Sixth, Inc.; Seventh Corp.; Eigth., Inc.
Date of Loss:	
Type of Claim:	Defective Product
Situs:	International Airport, Short Term Parking Structure
Damages Sought:	$8 million for cost of repairs, $4 million in lost revenues
Court/Case:	Court of Common Pleas of Fictitious County, PA, No. XX 97-99999
Date of Service:	11/25/98
Answer Due:	2/16/99
Insurance:	Travelers Property Casualty
Facts:	Second East, Inc. was subcontracted by NotReal Co. to install a somethingorother on the garage project. Sample, Inc. formulated, designed, manufactured and supplied Sample Product to other co. Other co. completed installation of the Sample Product in approximately September 1992. It is alleged that the Sample Product subsequently debonded and delaminated, allowing water to penetrate and damage the garage's precast concrete.

Agreement Records - Corporate Legal Department

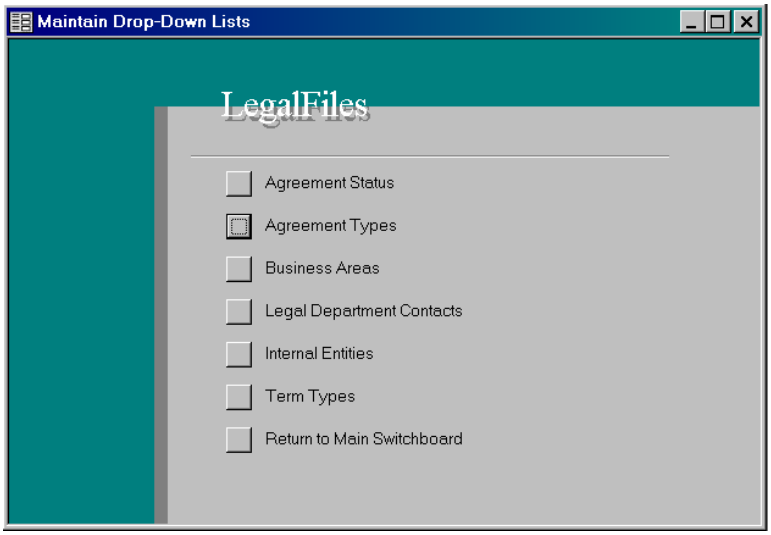
When this database is opened, it opens the main data entry screen, rather than the switchboard, because this is the information that needs to be accessed 95% of the time. The user can easily get to the main switchboard by clicking a button, if needed:



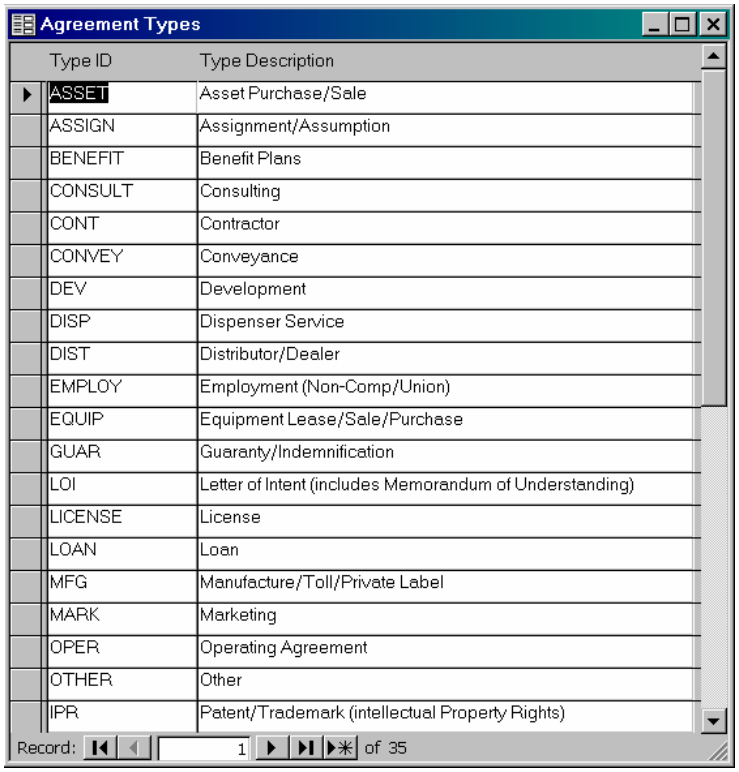
The main switchboard gives users access to the drop-down list tables (for when they need updating) and the report switchboard.



The switchboard used for maintaining the drop-down lists gives the users easy access to the various drop-down list tables:



For example, if a new Agreement Type needs to be added, the user clicks that button and is presented with a simple form for adding or updating that information:



Determining Customer Needs / Requirements

The first thing I do when I begin a new database project is sit down with the decision maker to discuss what they want to get from the database. Are they looking to reduce duplicate effort? Track jobs? Clarify reports? Organize information? Facilitate client contacts? Do they have an idea of how they want to accomplish that, or do they want me to determine for them the best method? How simple or complex do they want the database to be? Do they want to maintain it internally, or do they want to have me do periodic updates?

The first database I ever created for live use was created for *my* use, using Oracle, years ago. I used this database initially so that whenever a customer called, I could quickly pull up their record on the screen and immediately know everything that had happened pertaining to that customer since they first became a customer. I had *hundreds* of customer contacts every week, and every time I spoke to one of them, they assumed that I remembered them from the last time we had talked. I didn't, but my database allowed me to appear as if I did, and each customer felt special because of that. We had *a lot* of repeat business, and I truly believe that my little database was a large part of the reason for that.

This experience is what I try to provide to my customers. My goal is to create a database that allows its users to excel at whatever it is they need to accomplish.

To do this I follow a process:

1. We discuss what their needs are both with the decision maker and with the staff who will actually be using the end product.
2. I review forms, reports, files - basically any document that can help describe for me what information they gather and report on a regular basis, and the formats they are most comfortable with.
3. We review work/paper flows to determine who is responsible for which tasks within the organization, the methods they currently use for accomplishing those tasks, what they like about those methods and what they believe needs to be changed.
4. I describe to the client what I understand their needs to be and allow them to clarify or modify that understanding at this point.
5. I provide the client with an overview of how I intend to achieve their goals, sometimes, if warranted, drawing pictures of the elements to be contained in the database. If they agree that I have correctly understood them, we proceed. (There are occasions when the client can be better served by ***not*** using a database at all - I once had a client who wanted me to create a database that would track inventory and notify them when they needed to reorder. I knew of a software package that would do exactly what they were trying to accomplish, and it only cost about what I would charge for two hours work. They bought it and I lost the business - but they did refer another client to me later.)

Creating a "Rough Draft" Database

Once we are in agreement that I understand what they want, I begin putting together the database. After I have a working prototype, minus some of the bells and whistles that will make it user-friendly, we review it to determine if it is what they expected. At this point, we can easily tweak it or add to it, or change direction, if necessary. Customer feedback throughout the process is *critical* to customer satisfaction in the end, and I will not proceed without it.

Adding / Modifying Functions

This is where we add all the nifty little items that make the end product really effective - macro buttons, switchboards, custom reports, etc. This is also where I do most of the hard testing to ensure that everything behaves exactly as the user would expect it to do, and if the user does something that doesn't make sense (like putting a date in a field that is meant to hold currency), that the database handles it gracefully.

We review the database a final time, and if the customer agrees that it is complete, we have the option of proceeding with the next steps.

Documenting Database Screens, Reports, Functions, & Procedures (optional)

I create a "manual" which describes how to best use the database. Sometimes this is very detailed with step-by-step instructions, and sometimes it simply gives an overview of what can be done and where to find it. The level of detail is determined by who will be using it (offices with high turnover rates really need good documentation to get new people up and running quickly) and how often the database will be used (a person who uses the database every day will need less "reminder" information than someone who uses it once a month.)

Training Employees (optional)

In many instances, the people I have been working with on the creation of the database are the same people who will be using it on a day-to-day basis, and they don't need any further training. In other cases, there are a number of people who will be using it who haven't yet seen it, and they need to be quickly brought up to speed on the features, functions and "feel" of an Access database.

I usually go through all the screens and reports the customer will be using, describing how they work and what they do while taking questions as they come up. I also like to have each person who will be using the database try out a couple of things for themselves while I'm there, so that if any questions come up I can answer them on the spot.

Ongoing Support (optional)

In general, Access is pretty easy to use and customers don't need a lot of hand-holding once they become accustomed to it. However, in the first days and weeks I make myself as available as possible to answer any questions that may arise. And occasionally a customer will run across something that I may have missed (For example, adding a field in the middle of a form after that form has been created will change the order in which the fields are tabbed through. Most of the time I catch this type of thing before delivering the final product, but there have been instances where I didn't, and we fix it during the support period.)

My feeling is that it's always better for my customers to ask about anything that they are unsure of, rather than proceed to do something incorrectly only to later find out that the database doesn't perform as expected.

I want each and every customer to be as happy with the results of their database as I was with *my* first database.