WHAT IS DOCUMENT ASSEMBLY?

Most document assembly programs integrate with your legal practice management software (LPMS) or word processor, enabling you to create sophisticated templates. LPMS vendors often include simple document assembly tools. These programs take information already entered into the system, such as client name or case number, and "fill in the blanks" on a template. Users can match these fields up in a "one to many" fashion where the LPMS field of "client name" can appear in multiple places in the template and, hence, in the resulting document. These simpler, easier-to-use programs do not ask questions, but merely "transplant" data from the LPMS into the document. When the LPMS finishes, the user downloads and edits the resulting document like a standard word-processing file.

More sophisticated assembly programs, especially those independent of an LPMS product, offer many additional features, but at the cost of complexity. Their templates typically generate an interview (series of questions) and present it to the user. Upon answering the questions, the program instantly generates a customized document. In addition to simply filling in blanks, like the simple "merge" tools, robust document assembly programs support conditional logic (*e.g.*, include the guardianship paragraph if the client has minor children or adult disabled children), infinite lists, and the ability to calculate text, numbers, and dates.

For sophisticated programs, the onscreen interview is quite powerful because the template designer can control everything about the sequence and content of the interview. With practice, you can reproduce your entire decision tree in the template and build safeguards that walk even novice users through the assembly process. An example of how an interview looks is shown below:
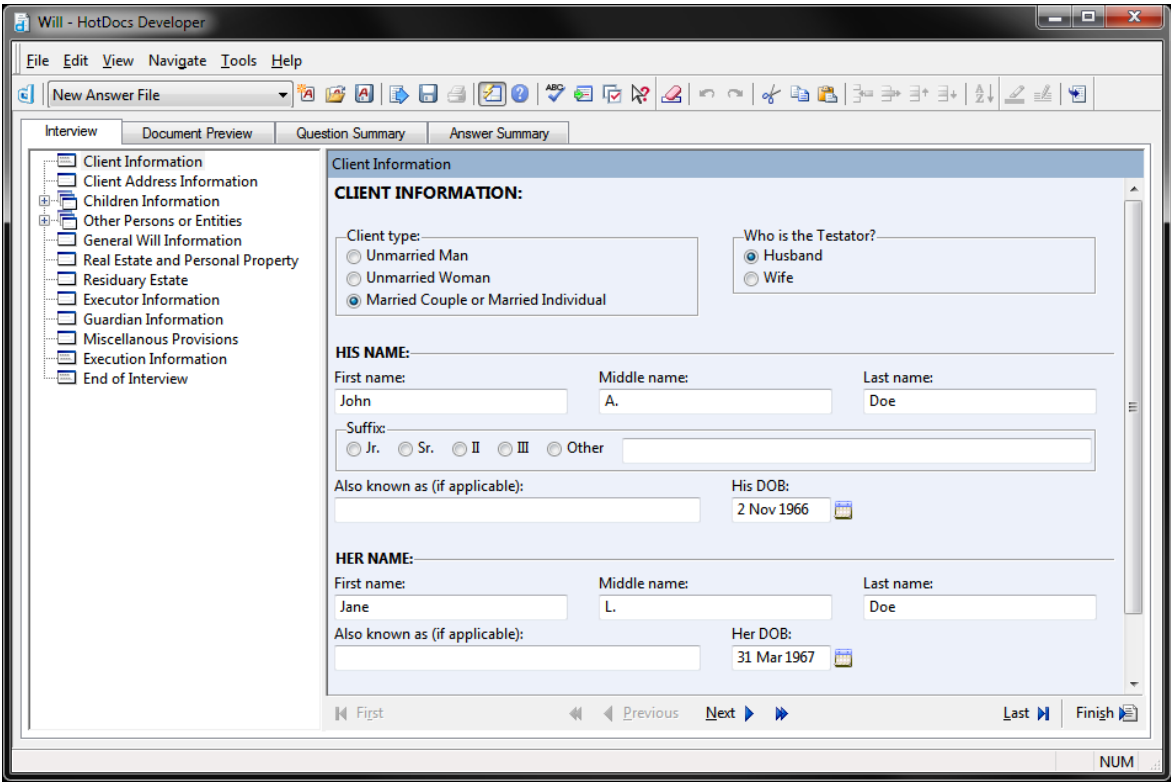
HOW IT WORKS - BIG PICTURE

Using HotDocs as an example, the program allows users to replace changeable text with variables (i.e., «Testator Name», «Testator Street Address»), make the inclusion of text (words, sentences, paragraphs, etc.) conditional, gather (infinite) lists, and automatically calculate dates, text, and numbers.

By "lists," we mean the template can gather and process multiple records. This is particularly important with legal documents because there are almost always parties, and you never know how many there will be. For example, in a deed, you have grantors and grantees. There could be more than one of each. In estate planning documents, multiple children, executors/personal representatives, beneficiaries, guardians, or trustees may exist. All of those things are lists. Good document assembly software lets you enter as many parties as necessary, and, based on how many you enter, the template will produce the correct language. For example, depending upon what the user enters into a list of children in a Will, the document may say:

- "John Doe has no children." or
- "John Doe has one child, April, age 20." or
- "John Doe has two children, April, age 20, and Alexandra, age 18." or
- "John Doe has three children, April, age 20, Alexandra, age 18, and Rebecca, age 16."

The point is that whatever the user enters, the template produces the correct language and verb conjugation, and it doesn't matter how many there are.

With each new variable, you create a corresponding question presented to the user during the assembly process. Generating a new document requires only answering the questions presented by the template. After the user answers the questions, the program displays the completed document onscreen (in Word directly or for download in Word format), ready to edit, save, print, etc.

After a document is assembled, HotDocs allows users to save the answers entered for one document to create other documents with the same information. In this manner, users simultaneously decrease the margin for error while eliminating time wasted on redundant data entry. The document produced by HotDocs is a plain word processor document and can be edited and stored like any other document.

SOPHISTICATED DOCUMENT ASSEMBLY OPTIONS

LPMS options often include the simpler merge assembly tools as part of their subscription service. But for sophisticated results, like those described above, one subscribes to a separate program. Some sophisticated programs can read information from, and occasionally write information to, one or more of the *many* LPMS choices.

There are several powerful available document automation applications and, while each has a unique way of handling the task, they all are very capable and able to achieve the objectives we discuss below. Each of them works with Microsoft Word. Some provide the ability to automate PDF forms. We recommend exploring the various options and deciding which application best meets your practice needs regarding availability, functionality, and cost.

Here are some options:

- ActiveDocs;
- Gavel (integrates with Clio; see Lawyerist's review here);
- HotDocs (a subset of HotDocs features is available in CARET Legal's Enterprise Advance tier);
- Knackly (integrates with Clio and Filevine; see Lawyerist's review here);
- Lawyaw (a Clio subsidiary; see Lawyerist's review here);
- Pathagoras;
- Perfectus;
- Smokeball (an LPMS with sophisticated assembly tools; see Lawyerist's review here); and

- [TheFormTool & Doxserá]().