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FileCenter Pro *by Joel P. Bruckenstein*

A Powerful Yet Inexpensive Document Management Solution

This issue is primarily about document management software. Dave offers a preview of a new, soon to be released SOHO application from Laserfiche, and I'm covering FileCenter Pro. The heavy document management emphasis this month was not by design. Dave got an opportunity to get an early peek at Laserfiche's beta, and he took it. After a number of false starts, I finally had a chance to look at FileCenter, so I didn't want to pass it up the opportunity to do so.

As most of you know, many of our article ideas come from readers. Over the last year or two, a handful of readers have requested that we look at FileCenter Pro, but since we had more story ideas than space, FileCenter got put on the back burner for a while. Now, we can try to make up for lost time.

FileCenter Pro is designed to be an inexpensive, easy-to-use file management/paperless office solution. It is distributed by Lucion Technologies, LLC (they were formerly known as Authoritative.Net), a firm headquartered in Orem, Utah. FileCenter was developed by Jeff Pickard, the founder of zCalc, a well known suite of analytical tools used primarily in the fields of tax and estate planning.

Lucion (<http://www.lucion.com>) produces two versions of FileCenter: The Standard version, which currently costs \$49.95, and FileCenter Pro, which currently sells for \$149.95. The standard version is targeted primarily at home users. The Pro version is designed for business use. With the Standard version you get file management, one-click PDF conversion, file security (encryption), search capabilities, and one-click email attachments. The Pro version adds additional features such as a scanning front end, the ability to convert scanned images into searchable PDF files, automated separating and routing of scanned documents, automated OCR of scanned documents, the ability to share settings on a network, and the ability to automatically route work from a monitored network folder. For most VON readers, the added features of the Pro version more than justify the additional outlay, so I decided to review the Professional version.

FileCenter Pro... *Continued*

Setup

Getting started with FileCenter Pro could not have been easier. I downloaded the program, installed it, and provided my registration key. As part of the installation routine, I was offered the opportunity to sign up for either a free or paid version of Mozy, the online backup service. The free version, targeted at home users, provides 2GB of free storage. The paid version, at \$4.95 per month, offers unlimited storage, but it is supposed to be for personal use only. The Pro version for small businesses costs \$3.95 per month plus \$0.50 per GB per month. Lucion is also a reseller of an online backup service called FileBackup, which is provided by Iron Mountain, a NYSE-listed firm with over 90,000 corporate clients. This service, with prices starting at \$49.95 per year for 2GB of storage (\$199.95 for 10GB, \$379.95 for 20GB and \$499.95 for 30GB) saves to an Iron mountain storage facility.

Both Mozy and FileBackup offer encrypted data transmission and Web-based access to your files. If you do not currently use an online backup service as part of your overall backup/disaster recovery procedure, you might want to consider adding one of these two providers to your backup mix.

Once the installation was complete, the FileCenter Getting Started Wizard launched. A picture of the initial screen is displayed in Figure 1.

As indicated on the screen, the wizard offers a very brief overview of the product and then it proceeds to walk you through the setup process. This is very important because reader feedback indicates that setting up one's filing system is the most daunting task that advisors face when it comes to document management systems. Those who arrive at a filing system they feel comfortable with early on in the process almost uniformly end up happy, while those who struggle with the filing system do not.



Figure 1

VIRTUAL OFFICE NEWS ("VON") ORDER FORM

PLEASE TYPE OR PRINT CLEARLY (*REQUIRED FIELDS)

*Subscriber Name: _____ *Date _____

Company: _____

*Customer Telephone _____ *Email Address: _____



Check one of the following three options:

Option #1: 12 month subscription **\$ 199.95**

NO REFUNDS will be issued once your credit card has been charged.

Option #2: 12 month auto-renewal subscription **\$ 169.95**

By selecting this option you are allowing VON to charge your credit card annually for \$169.95/year. You can cancel your auto-renewal at any time; however there are NO REFUNDS once your credit card has been charged for the year.

Option #3: Monthly subscription with auto-renewal **\$ 19.95/month**

By selecting this option you are allowing VON to charge your credit card on the 1st of each month for the amount of \$19.95. You can cancel your monthly option at any time, however there are NO REFUNDS once your credit card has been charged for the month.

Please include a copy of this order form when you fax us your credit card authorization.

Fax To: 1-877-271-3959

Sunset Financial Management, Inc. is authorized to charge my subscription fee to the following credit card:

Visa _____ **MasterCard** _____ **Discover** _____ **American Express** _____

Card Number: _____

Name as it appears on card (please print clearly): _____

Billing Address: _____

City/State/Zip: _____

Amount to be charged \$ _____ **Exp Date:** _____

Signature: _____

FileCenter Pro... *Continued*

Getting to Know FileCenter Pro

From an organizational point of view, FileCenter Pro is a file navigation overlay. It does not change the existing information on your hard drive, but it can display it in a more intuitive way. You can think of it as a superior alternative to Windows Explorer. Since FileCenter piggybacks off many Windows features, including the Windows file system, FileCenter Pro launches files in their native format, just as Windows does. So, if you store a MS Word document in FileCenter, it will open the document in MS Word. If you save an Excel spreadsheet, FileCenter will launch MS Excel when you double click on an xls file to open it.

For your convenience, FileCenter Pro generally allows you to toggle back and forth between the FileCenter view and the Windows Explorer view, so if there are instances where the default Windows interface is preferable, you can get there immediately.

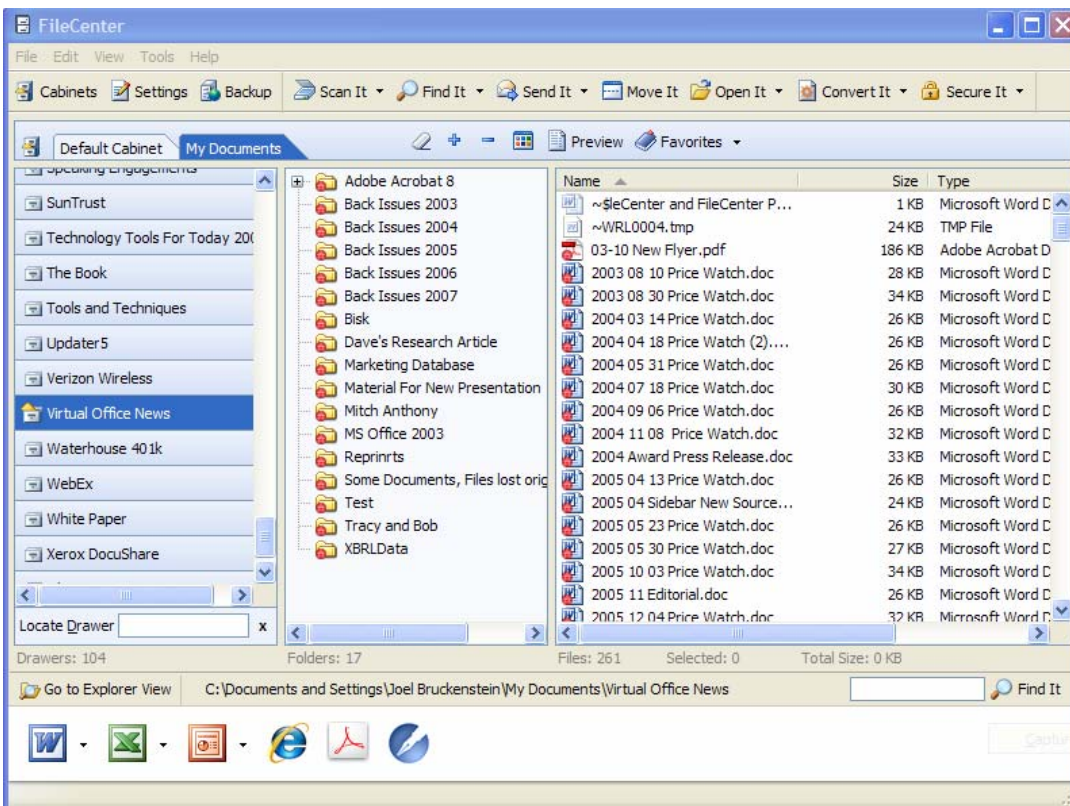


Figure 2 Cabinet. The My Documents Cabinet is active. On the left section of the main window, you can see the file drawers. The *Virtual Office News* drawer is open, and the folders within the drawer are displayed in the middle pane. On the right, the application displays the individual files contained within the folder.

Below the main window there are shortcuts to your favorite programs. You can load a file into an application by simply dragging and dropping it onto the program icon. For example, if I wanted to edit an MS Word document, I could simply drag it to the MS Word icon, and Word would launch with the document loaded. This favorites section is customizable.

Before one can create a filing system using FileCenter Pro, it helps to understand its file structure. FileCenter Pro uses a physical file cabinet metaphor. There are four “levels” to the system, just like the ones you would have in a paper system: file cabinets, file drawers, file folders, and individual files. As illustrated in Figure 2, cabinets are accessed through the tabs that run along the top of the display windows.

Here, we have two file cabinets: Default Cabinet and My Documents

FileCenter Pro... *Continued*

Once you understand the filing conventions, the Getting Started Wizard is easily understood. It offers you three options (you can select one or all three) to create your file structure. The first option is to create a My Documents cabinet from your existing My Documents folder. That is essentially what I did in the sample below. The second option is to create an empty default cabinet. You would do this if you wanted to create a new file structure or something in addition to the My Documents folder that you are converting. The third option is Map a New Cabinet to an Existing Folder. You would use this if you already had a file structure other than the My Documents folder that you wanted to view and manipulate through the FileCenter interface.

In my example, I converted the My Documents folder to a cabinet, but that may or may not be the best method for you. One of the nice things about using a file overlay like FileCenter Pro is that you don't have to display everything that Windows Explorer does. If you want to limit the files and folders that can be viewed in FileCenter, converting the whole My Documents folder may not be the way to go. It might be better to only map selected folders to FileCenter.

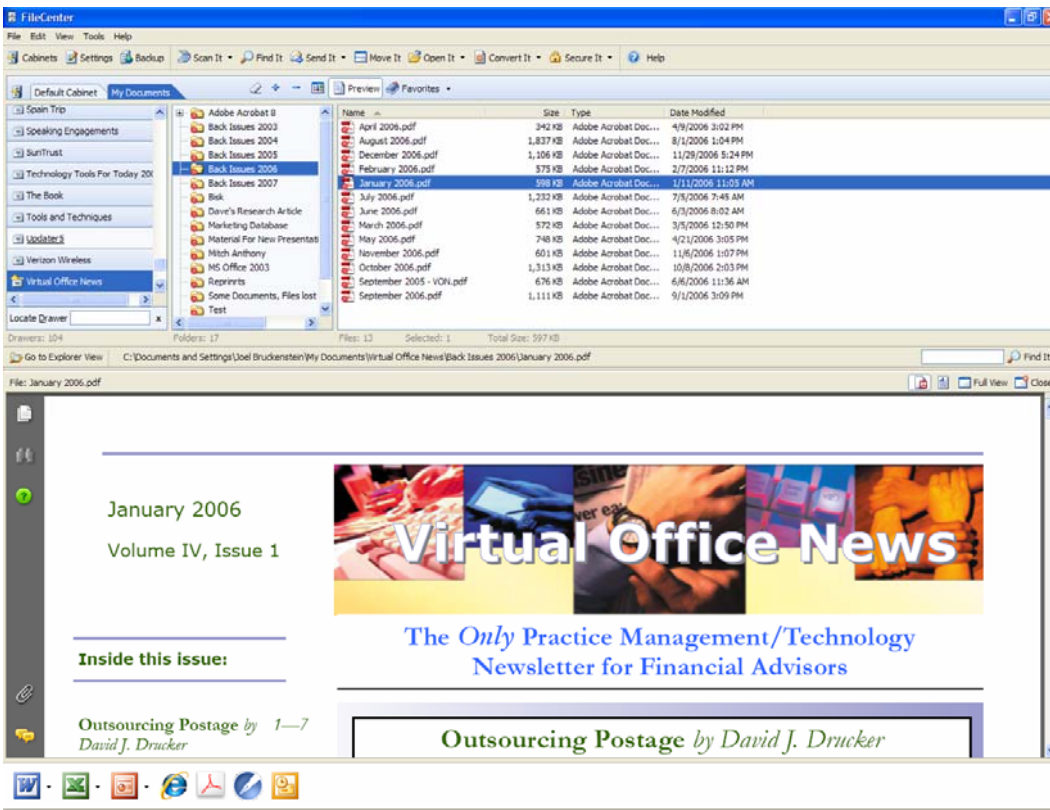


Figure 3

other, or you might choose to create a cabinet only for active clients and not display the inactive ones on the FileCenter view at all.

From a productivity point of view, the less clutter you have in your filing system the better, so if you have many folders on your hard drive, but you (or an assistant) only work on a subset of the folders regularly, there is a strong case for only displaying the frequently used ones. The others are still readily accessible through Windows if and when you need them.

Another nifty FileCenter feature is the preview pane, illustrated in Figure 3 above. Sometimes, you need to peer into a file. This might be because, in spite of your best filing efforts, you are not sure

FileCenter Pro... *Continued*

whether the document you have identified is the one you are looking for. In another case, you might know you have the right document, but you need to see a figure on the front page of it. In either case, you could launch the application and view the document, but using the preview pane is faster. Launching one or more programs can take time and it can strain system resources. The preview pane is fast and efficient.

One of FileCenter's most powerful features is the Save As dialog box. This box replaces the Windows "save as" box when the program is installed, although you can easily toggle back to the Windows view if you want to. The power of the FileCenter Save As box, besides the superior view, is the

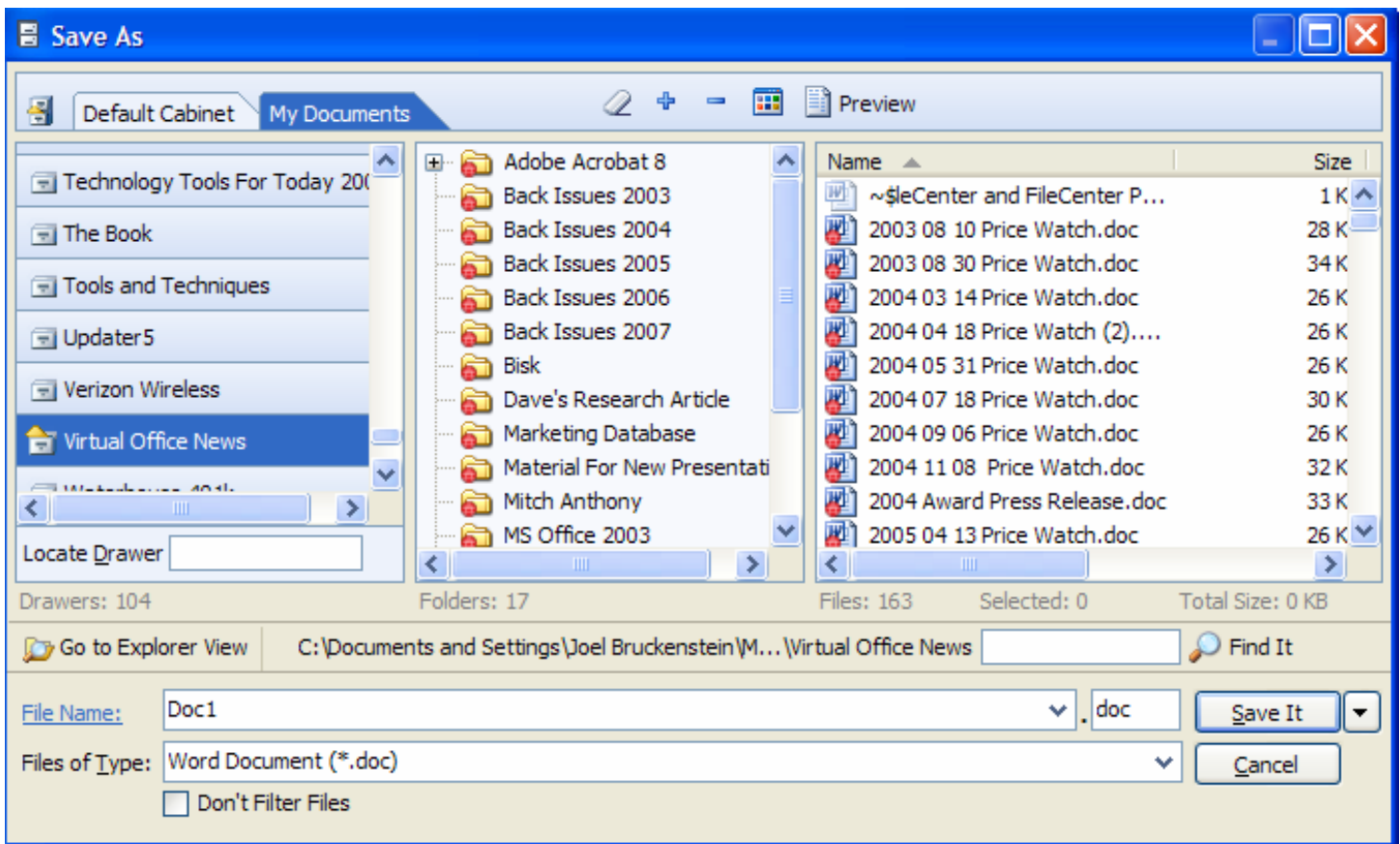


Figure 4 superior, automated rules-based naming capabilities. Advisors can automate the naming of files using custom rules they create. So, for example, an advisor could create a rule that includes the name of a folder (e.g., a client's name), a date, and a sequential number automatically as part of the file name. So, if you had a file for Mr. Smith, and today was Feb 1, 2007, the filename would be preprogrammed to start as follows : **Smith 2007 02 01**. If you had a folder of invoices for Mr. Smith, you could program the command to add that to the prefix, so it would begin as follows: **Smith 2007 02 01 Invoice#**

The "Scan It" button, visible along the top of Figure 2, makes basic scanning quick and easy. You can program the button to do the kind of scan you do most often (duplex B&W perhaps) and you just load the paper and push the button. If you need to make adjustments to the default settings, you can

FileCenter Pro... *Continued*

click on “advanced scan” which displays the TWAIN interface. Here, you can change the scanner settings to suit your needs.

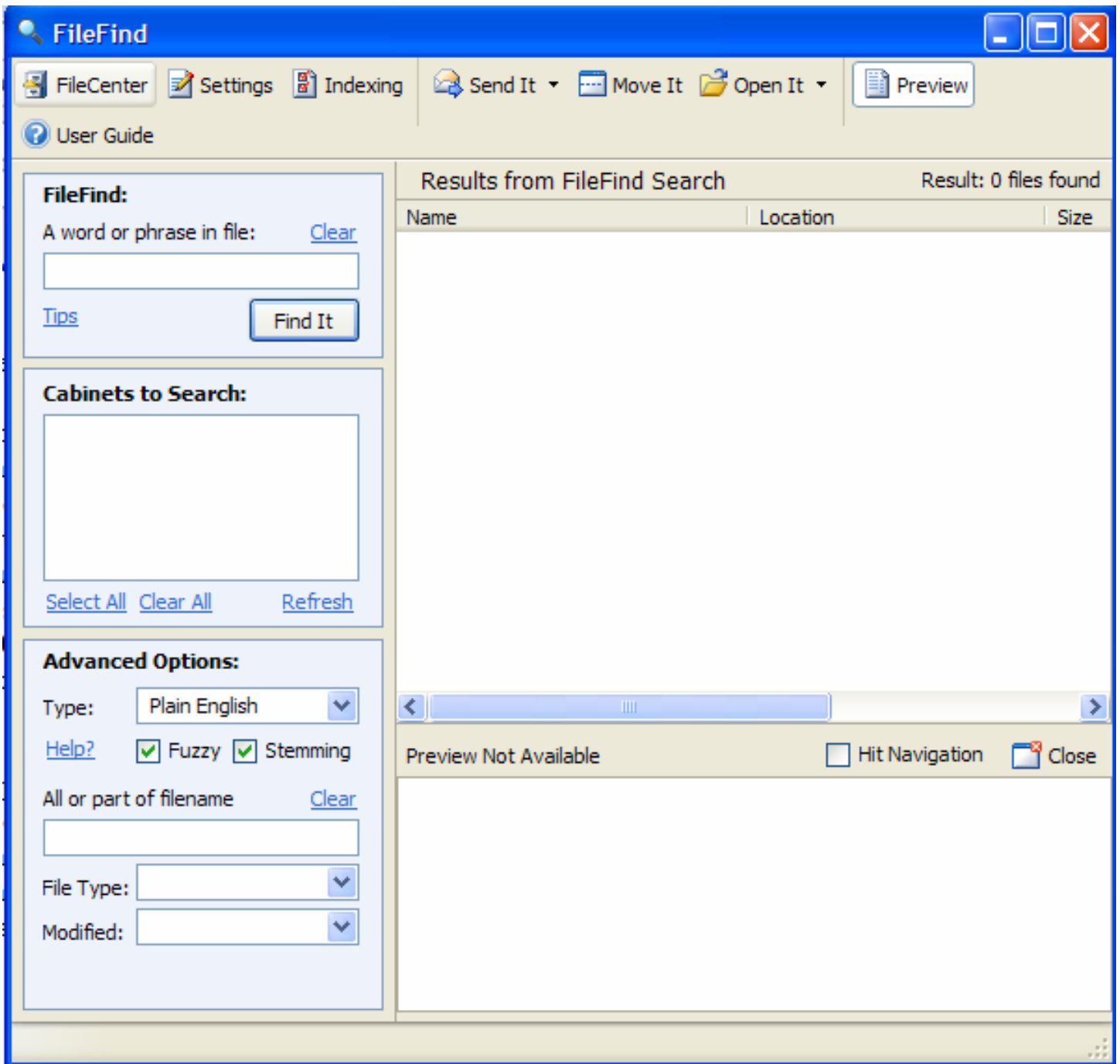


Figure 5

FileCenter Pro... *Continued*

Finding Stuff

Aside from eliminating paper and saving space, the reason that advisors scan and file is so they can quickly find stuff when they need it. FileCenter offers a number of ways to find stuff. The first is the file folder overlay. If you set up your file system properly, many of you will be able to find documents by simply navigating to the appropriate folder. If that doesn't work, you can use the Find File dialog box pictured in Figure 5 (previous page).

FileCenter can index all of the words contained in electronic files, and it can be programmed to automatically perform optical character recognition (OCR) on all scanned documents using the included OCR engine. This engine is fast and it is 96% accurate — more than accurate enough for indexing purposes. If you happen to have a more accurate OCR engine installed on your computer (such as OmniPage Pro or Abbyy Fine Reader), you can instruct FileCenter to use it instead. You'll most likely get improved OCR results, but the OCR process will be slower.

To aid in your searches, FileCenter offers a number of advanced options. Two that merit explanations are fuzzy matching and stemming matches. Fuzzy matching will find a word even if it is misspelled. For example, a fuzzy search for "virtual" will find "virtuall." Fuzzy matching is useful when you are searching text that may contain typographical errors or for text that has been scanned using optical character recognition (OCR). Stemming searches cover grammatical variations on a word. For example, a search for "studied" would also find "studying," "studies," and "study."

Additional Features

FileCenter Pro, through the use of plain text separators, can automatically route documents to their intended destination folder. For example, let's say you have three 15-page documents. The destination of each document is a specific client's folder. You could create a page separator for each using the included utility, put the three documents in the feed tray, and go do something else. The rest of the process would be automated. As an alternative, you could just tell the program to number each document and send it to a general "scanned" folder. From here, you or an assistant would manually index the documents. The program has an additional setting for single-page scans. You can automatically tell it to create a separate document for each scanned page, automatically name it (if desired) and file it.

The "send it" button, another nice feature, allows you to select a file and have it automatically attached to an email message. If you prefer, files can be emailed in their native format or as zipped files. All three formats can be sent as encrypted files if you wish. Another additional feature is the conversion utility. With FileCenter, you can take any document and automatically convert it to a PDF file.

Speaking of encryption, and file stored within the system can be encrypted. Folders can also be encrypted. In addition, FileCenter offers file shredding capabilities. Some readers may be aware that deleting a file does not necessarily get rid of a file permanently. This could leave potentially sensitive information at risk. Using the file shredder technology, you can really, truly delete a file forever!

FileCenter Pro... *Continued*

On a network, FileCenter can be set up to monitor a “watch” folder. Each time a file in the TIFF format enters the watch folder, FileCenter will automatically process it and route it to its destination.

Pros

There is a lot to like about FileCenter Pro. To begin with, it is a good value for the money. You get a great deal of functionality for a very reasonable price. Scanning, document management, automated email attachments, encryption, the shredder, etc. for \$149.95 is a good deal!

The file structure, with filing cabinets, drawers, folder and files is as intuitive as it gets. The “Save As” on steroids is another strong feature. When combined with the power of automated file naming, the Save As feature really shines.

Unlike some other document management systems, FileCenter Pro does not store documents within a database. Instead, it uses the Windows file system, which is much more transparent to the user. FileCenter maintains a search index, much like the popular desktop search tools do (Google Desktop Search, Yahoo Desktop Search, Copernic Desktop Search) to help you find what you need fast.

Because FileCenter Pro piggybacks off of Windows, an uninstall will not cause any major problems should you decide at some point to cease using it. The FileCenter views and other utilities will be gone, but all of your files will remain accessible through Windows.

FileCenter Pro offers a “Folder Templating Tool,” another useful feature. Let’s say that every time you take on a new client, you create a client folder for that client with a total of ten subfolders. You can set this structure up as a template, click a button, and install the whole structure for the new client.

Cons

While FileCenter Pro has much to offer, it is not perfect. While the file navigation is highly intuitive, some other parts of the program are not. For example, in the search pane pictured in Figure 5, it was not immediately apparent to me that the search box in the upper left looks *only* for words in the body of a document. It does not search the file name. If you want to search the file name, you can only do so with the advanced search field on the lower left.

The filing and retrieval systems are a mixed bag. On the one hand, the FileCenter Pro system is really simple. It should be effective for SOHO and ensemble firms. On the other hand, as firms grow, the continuity of using multiple indices as the primary filing methodology might have more appeal.

FileCenter Pro uses a TWAIN interface exclusively. There is nothing inherently wrong with this, and it keeps the cost down, but as we have detailed in the past, it is nice to have the option of ISIS drivers that can perform some additional tricks.

I said earlier that folders can be encrypted, but each file gets encrypted individually. While the ability to batch encrypted files is useful, it is not the optimal method of encrypting folders. In fact, one could

FileCenter Pro... *Continued*

say that the encryption is really designed to be used on a limited basis for the most sensitive files, not as a wholesale method of encrypting all of one's client files.

Not all of FileCenter's capabilities are readily discernable or accessible. When I was originally trying to locate the TWAIN scanner dialog box, my first stop was not "File...Scan it...Advanced Scan..." I doubt it would be yours either. The documentation is not as helpful as it could be. Adding to the confusion, the help files for the scanning module are only available from the help menu within the scanning module itself. I'm sure this was done because the scanning module is not included in the Standard version, but it is extremely frustrating to Pro users — at least it was to this one.

Some of the conventions are confusing or inconsistent. For example, if you delete a file cabinet, you do not delete the underlying files and folders; however, if you delete a folder, you are actually deleting the contents of the folder. In fairness, you will get a warning and you can change the program preferences to make the folders behave like the cabinets. However, I still fear that some readers will run into problems here.

Right now, there is no automated way of moving email from MS Outlook, for example, into FileCenter Pro, although I've been told that the developers are already working on such a solution, which they expect to launch by the end of June 2007.

The application lacks annotation features. I know that both Dave and I make liberal use of annotation features in our work and, from what I understand, so do many readers. I view this as a serious deficiency.

Bottom Line

It is readily apparent to me why FileCenter Pro appeals to some of our readers. The file management interface is attractive and the scanning module works well. Searches, once you master the quirks, are effective. When you add in the automation features (auto-naming, batch scanning with separators, etc.), the email capabilities, the encryption and the shredding, FileCenter Pro is an excellent value.

That said, I do not believe it is for everyone. If you are comfortable relying on the "virtual file cabinets," that is, if you already had a highly effective paper system that you just want to move to the digital world or, if you already have a good filing system within Windows, FileCenter Pro will definitely appeal to you. For others, I'm just a bit hesitant to recommend relying on OCR-based searches. Some readers have had success going that route, but others end up with searches that produce too many hits. Yes, I know that you can narrow the searches if you can master the search tools, but in my experience, some folks just never master this science. While not a fatal flaw, I really do believe that annotation tools are a highly desirable feature that FileCenter Pro lacks.

Despite some reservations, I think there are many advisors who are could benefit greatly from FileCenter Pro. Those on a tight budget, those in smaller firms, and those who are more meticulous filers are probably the ideal candidates, although I could easily see this program appealing to others as well. With the addition of MS Outlook integration, it is possible that this application will be an

FileCenter Pro... *Continued*

even more attractive package. If Lucion decides to improve the documentation and to include annotation features too, it might be become a compelling buy.

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