

## SILQ v BarBooks

By Dominic Villa

Earlier this year a new practice management software package developed for barristers named BarBooks burst onto the scene, challenging the monopoly enjoyed by SILQ over many years. As more and more practice management is performed online and while mobile, it is time to compare BarBooks and SILQ.

### BarBooks

As its name suggests, BarBooks is primarily an accounting program. In a nutshell, it allows you to record time, generate invoices from that time record, keep track of expenses and receipts, reconcile receipts and expenses with bank statements, and generate various financial and tax-related reports. BarBooks has been around for a little over 18 months, and has a modern, browser-style interface as a result.

BarBooks is available as a 'web app' which can be used in your browser, or as a download for Windows or Mac, from the BarBooks website ([www.BarBooksaustralia.com](http://www.BarBooksaustralia.com)). There is also a mobile version available for iOS devices. While the downloads are free, continued access beyond a fully-functional 14 day trial period requires a subscription which is available for \$72 per month (which includes the new BankRec feature), or \$720 (without BankRec) or \$864 (with BankRec) per year, or as a reader for \$180 (with BankRec) for the year. These prices are ex GST, although not identified as such until you reach the subscription page.

The single subscription provides access to a user's data using any of the available software formats on multiple devices. The data is stored locally on the user's device as well as on a server maintained by BarBooks, and synchronized across devices. Multiple users can also be given access to the user's data for no additional fee.

Getting started with BarBooks is very simple. You simply go to the website and click 'Register for a 14 day trial', enter an email address and a password and away you go. The registration process does not seek confirmation of your email or password, nor does it assess the strength of your password. Given that the data is stored and synchronized in 'the cloud', security is of the utmost importance.

Once the registration process is complete, you simply log in using the previously registered email address and password, and the software then presents you with a program-wide 'Preferences' pane consisting of two tabs: 'Profile' where you can enter your contact and banking details; and 'Rates' where you can enter the rates to be charged for various different items of work, and various other accounting details.

There are some quirky things about this Preferences window.

The 'Profile' tab prompts you for a title, but suggests only 'Mr/Mrs'. It prompts you for an ABN, but suggests the format '000 000 000', not recognising that an ABN has 11 digits. And unless you also include 'ABN', it will appear in documents generated using the default templates simply as the numbers. The 'Profile' tab also prompts you for a mobile number, which by default is given the non-mobile area code '02'. It also asks for a state and Country, without having a lookup table for the state, and without including Australia as the default Country.

The 'Rates' tab also has some quirks. It usefully presents you with a default GST/VAT option of 10 per cent, Invoice Payment Terms are 30 days, and the Accounting Methods is Cash, the Invoice Interest Rate is 0 per cent. It could more usefully default to the currently prevailing rate under the Uniform Law. However, where this tab is useful is that it allows you to create, during the sign-up process, default rates for all of the various different activities that one might charge a specific rate for. By default, it prompts for hourly, half-day and daily rates, a rate for directions/mentions and a rate for motions. You can add new activities, or delete any of the defaults.

One thing about the 'Rates' tab, however, is that it makes much more sense if you've seen the costs agreement template, and in a sense what is lacking from the initial set-up process in BarBooks is an explanation of why you are entering certain information, and how it will be used by BarBooks. And a word of warning: if you delete any of the default Rates options you will need to also amend the costs agreement template. BarBooks' templates do not seem to recognise when a field is blank (more on that later). And if you add additional Rates options, they too will need to be added to the costs agreement template.

Rather than using 'Save' and 'Don't Save' buttons, BarBooks uses a Green Tick and a Red Cross (while they are buttons they don't have a border). This is fine if you are a mouse-user. However, if you tend to navigate and select using the keyboard then when you tab through to the Green Tick or the Red Cross there is no change of the background colour or dotted line to highlight the currently-selected button. Instead, there is a barely perceptible change of shade, so it is not always obvious where you have landed. On a similar note, every new dialogue box requires you to tab twice to move the cursor into the first text field, or use the mouse to do so. System-wide BarBooks needs to be made a little more keyboard-friendly.

Once you've completed the Preferences window, you are then presented with the BarBooks Dashboard. Half the window is occupied by the 'Trend' section which presents graphs visually displaying weekly, monthly and quarterly WIP. My jury is out as to whether this is likely to produce motivation, or induce

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depression. Underneath is an 'Overview' enabling the display of no less than 28 items of financial information at a frequency and for a period selected by the user. No doubt the developers thought this was a great idea. It's not. There is no way to select which of these items to display, although you do have the option of displaying GST inclusive or exclusive amounts only. The remainder of the Dashboard displays the 'Tasks' that have been entered into the system since a user-selected date. By default, that date is the current date. If you're working on a 13 inch laptop, you will need to scroll down to access this section, which is perhaps the only useful section of the Dashboard window.

By 'window' I really mean tabs. Apart from the Dashboard tab there is a tab for Matters, Invoices, Receipts, Expenses, Reports, Contacts, Templates, and BankRec. These tabs are the basic way of navigating through the different sections of BarBooks. There are no real menus to speak of.

Within each tab (other than the Dashboard) there are a number of recurring elements. There is a green button with a white + sign enabling you to create a new matter, invoice, receipt etc. On some of the tabs filters can be used so as to display only items of a particular description (for example, current matters or archived matters, unpaid or overdue invoices, billed and unbilled expenses), and further filtered to display items from all time, or the last 7, 30, 60 or 90 days. Strangely, you cannot filter items in the Invoices, Receipts or Expenses by reference to a particular date range or by reference to a financial year. That information can only be obtained by generating a report, or by using the filters in the Overview section of the Dashboard.

The Matters tab is where the day-to-day action happens. This tab displays a summary of each of the matters, listing the name, the individual instructing solicitor, the 'Date' (which is the date the matter was created), the 'Total Hours' (which is the total of the billed and unbilled activity that is charged by the hour, but does not include activity that is charged per item, such as attending court at your daily rate), 'Invoices Overdue' (which is the number of days the oldest invoice is overdue, and not the amount that is overdue), 'Invoices Outstanding' (which is all unpaid invoices, whether or not due), 'Unbilled Work' (which is both unbilled time and matter-specific expenses), and a 'Total'. When you click on the name of a matter, it brings up a further 4 tabs named 'Tasks', 'Disbursements', 'Invoices' and 'Receipts'. From here you can add new items of those descriptions, and see a summary of the item already generated in that particular matter. You also have the option of creating a 'New Matter Document' which enables you to produce

a 'Blank' document (essentially just a letterhead), a costs agreement, a variation of fees (to update a costs agreement) and a Statement of Outstanding Fees.

Creation of a new matter is a simple task. Clicking 'Add Matter' brings up a dialogue box consisting of two tabs: 'Details' to provide descriptive information about the matter and 'Rates' which allows for matter-specific rates to override the default rates inserted in the general Preferences. The Details tab also allows you to allocate a solicitor to the matter, and to add a new solicitor's contact details (and create a Firm contact as well).

Time recording is undertaken by going into the particular matter and clicking on 'Add Task', which brings up a dialogue box asking for a description (you will need to double tab into, or click on, the Description box...the curse of the missing cursor) and providing other options such as the 'Rate' (which is really the unit of calculation), the 'Rate Amount' (which is really the rate, prepopulated with the default amount but allowing for a task-specific override), whether or not apply a discount to the task, and also the task's 'Duration'. The 'Duration' is prompted in HH:MM format, but again the text input is somewhat clumsily executed (here, for a refreshing change, the keyboard has it over the mouse). Once you have created a task it appears in the tasks list for the particular matter, and will appear in the Tasks list in the Dashboard.

Areas where the 'Add Task' functionality could be improved is by allowing a particular Task to be duplicated, and having a lookup table for commonly-used descriptions. It is also somewhat limiting that you can only add a new task or create a new timer from within a particular matter. Commonly-executed commands such as creating a new task or a new timer really should be accessible wherever you are in the program. There really should be keyboard shortcuts to allow this to occur as well.

If the 'Rate' selected for the task is 'hourly' then a light grey clock appears on the right hand side of the entry which then enables you to start a timer for that task (confusingly, there is also a smaller blue clock next to the 'Duration' entry for each task, but this icon simply denotes that the 'Duration' entry is in fact a timed activity). Clicking on the light grey clock starts the timer and a counter appears at the top of the screen. There is a button that allows you to pause (which when clicked turns into a 'play' button to allow you to resume the timer) and a button that allows you to stop the timer. Once stopped, the timer automatically rounds up to the nearest 15 minutes (a default option that can be changed in the Matter Details to 6, 10 or

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20 minutes). The timer for a particular task can be restarted after it is stopped by clicking on the grey clock icon again, but it will restart from the rounded-up time. You can have multiple timers for different tasks open at the same time, but only 1 timer will be counting at any one time. Unfortunately, the tasks list for a particular matter does not indicate which timers are open (whether counting or paused), and at the time of review there is no central location where all timers across all matters can be operated. However, in an update that will go live while this article is being published the timer feature is to be updated so that multiple timers will be displayed.

Creating invoices is relatively straightforward. You simply go to the particular matter, click on the Invoices tab, and then click on 'Add Invoice'. You are then given the option of an 'Interest' or a 'Regular' Invoice (curiously the Interest invoice is first in the list and one wonders whether, given the relative infrequency with which most people would generate an interest invoice, this simply creates an additional unnecessary step in the process). This then brings up a dialog box allowing you to select the tasks you want to invoice (by default all unbilled tasks are selected – there is no Select All or Deselect All option). The dialogue box then becomes slightly confusing. The usual Green Tick to save is now a Green Arrow which you need to click on to tab through the options of selecting outstanding disbursements, applying a discount and finally to select the invoice template. The pop-up for this process uses such a small part of the screen that one wonders why all of these options couldn't appear in a single tab. Ultimately, when you then click on the Green Tick (which has reappeared) BarBooks will then generate an invoice in Microsoft Word and either open it (Windows) or place it in your Downloads folder (Mac). The process is fairly straightforward. However....

Remember those pesky timers? There's a bit of a glitch when generating invoices while timers are open. If a timer is running then it will not allow you to invoice the matter until the timer has been stopped. It will generate an invoice while there are timers for the matter that are open, but paused. However, when it generates the invoice it does not round those timers up to the nearest 15 minutes (as it would if they were stopped) but will record on the invoice the actual time and charge according to the elapsed time not the rounded up time.

The templates that come with BarBooks are not pretty, but they can be relatively easily amended and reformatted, and the process for doing so is quite intuitive. For example, the default letterhead is in the following format:

Barrister Name 12 345 345 345   DX 123 Sydney T 1234 5678   F 9876 5432   barristername@gmail.com Old Chambers   180 Phillip Street, , Sydney 2000, NSW
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The double comma in the address line is an artefact of the fact that no text was input into the 'Street Line 2' in the preferences. It does not, by default, identify the ABN as an ABN. There is no mobile phone number (although asked for in the initial Preferences setup), and no website (which is not asked for during initial setup). The simple workaround is to modify the BarBooks templates so that the letterhead information is manually but permanently part of the template, rather than pulling in the details from the Preferences using field codes everytime a document was generated. BarBooks will also take your existing template documents and import them into BarBooks for you.

While the layout of some of the documents leaves a lot to be desired (the costs agreement is seven pages of mostly single-spaced text with no space between paragraphs) the content itself is comprehensive. The costs agreement contains a detailed set of provisions with reference to both the 2004 Legal Profession Act and the new Uniform Law. Similarly, invoices include text relating to the payment of interest and information about a client's rights to have costs assessed. A few glitches remain, however. The invoices state that the 'fees are calculated in accordance with the costs agreement dated' which refers to the date of the original costs agreement, but does not take into account a subsequent Variation of Fees. The Interest Invoice simply states the amount of interest owing, with no detail whatsoever of the basis upon which the interest has been calculated.

Interest is an area where both BarBooks and SILQ fail to deliver. In BarBooks there is only one place to select the interest rate, and that is in the general Rates tab in the BarBooks preferences. Effectively, in order to calculate interest on an unpaid invoice it is necessary to determine what is the applicable rate of interest (ie the Cash Rate Target plus two per cent as at the date of the issue of the relevant tax invoice), change the interest rate in the Rates tab in the general Preferences, and then generate the Interest Invoice. There is no lookup table of interest rates and effective dates that can be added to from time to time so that BarBooks can simply calculate interest by reference to the date of issue of the unpaid invoice. And the only way to calculate interest is to generate an interest invoice within BarBooks (it

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creates an invoice record in BarBooks, although it does not automatically create an invoice document).

The amount generated by the Interest Invoice cannot be readily verified without doing the calculation manually. Unfortunately, BarBooks does not tell you for how many days the invoice is unpaid. It also does not tell you how the interest calculation has been performed. This is problematic from a compliance point of view. Previously BarBooks calculated interest on the GST-exclusive amount of the unpaid invoice and calculated interest from the due date (ie 30 days after the issue date). In an update that will go live while this article is being published, that calculation will be changed to calculate interest on the GST-inclusive amount of the unpaid invoice and will calculate interest from the date of issue of the invoice. Practitioners will do well to remember that the entitlement to charge interest does not arise, however, until the invoice has been unpaid for 30 days or more.

I was able to determine how the interest calculation was performed by contacting BarBooks Support. Permanently positioned at the bottom right of the screen is a pop-up that says 'Send us a message and we will respond to you shortly'. If you click on that you are then provided with an option to send BarBooks a message, or alternatively to ring the help desk directly. It does say that 'We will get back to you within 3 hours of sending a message through' which is a slight overstatement: the author's experience has been that this is correct from early morning until late evening, and while late night queries have not been answered 'within three hours of sending' that have been promptly responded to very early the next morning. The support team has been very responsive, both in terms of responding to questions about how to do things and also in terms of helping to fix glitches, of which there were a few. Support is available by sharing screens remotely, web chat, telephone, email and on-site.

BarBooks does not come with sample data to play around with, although it does have a demonstration account that can be used for this purpose if required. However, the software is intuitive and simple to use and so it does not take a great deal of effort to quickly generate data to test its functionality during the trial period.

Recognising that many barristers already use any number of packages to undertake their accounting and time recording, BarBooks will assist with transferring that data across. This is not just data from SILQ, but also any number of other popular accounting programs such as MYOB. BarBooks will personally visit chambers to download the data for you and take it back to BarBooks to import it into your account, or alternatively walk

you through the download process so it can be emailed to them. They will clean-up the existing data to make it compatible for import, and if it can't be imported will manually enter the existing data for you. Similarly, they will take your precedent costs agreements, invoices, letterhead etc and set them up as BarBooks-friendly templates.

In terms of setup and demonstration, this can also be done in person, at the user's desk and the training is quite flexible so that the pace changes depending on how competent (or not) the user is in relation to a particular task. Online support documentation is lacking, however, and while there are a limited number of video tutorials usability would be greatly improved by having online manuals available.

The BarBooks iOS app is extremely useful for recording time and expenses, which is likely to be the main reason to use the iOS app. It is very easy to create new time entries (including using timers), and to record disbursements and expenses. It does not report a significant amount of financial information about invoices and receipts (although some totals are provided), but it does report which tasks in a particular matter have been billed, and provides a total of outstanding invoices and unbilled tasks for a particular matter. Enabling access to more detailed invoice information would also be useful: at present while out on the road you can tell your solicitor how much is outstanding on a matter, but you can't tell them when a particular invoice was issued, or for how much.

BarBooks is in many respects a work in progress, and the developers have been very responsive to suggestions for improvement. New features are being added regularly. The latest significant feature added to BarBooks is the Bank Reconciliation feature. This allows BarBooks to directly communicate with your online banking, download your transactions from one or more accounts, and then within BarBooks perform a reconciliation with invoices and expenses. It is not automatic, but it is a huge time saver, and the process can be semi-automated by setting up rules telling BarBooks to automatically recognise transactions with particular characteristics. The reconciliation of those transactions must still be confirmed manually, which is no bad thing, and the time saved justifies the additional fee charged for access to this feature. BarBooks is also working on Xero integration to allow accountants to get direct feeds of the data.

### SILQ

SILQ has been around since the early days of Windows XP, and it shows. It is not elegant. In many ways it is the classic design of a horse ending as a camel. The accretion of additional functionality over 14 years has resulted in a more complicated

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piece of software than it needs to be. It crashed on more than one occasion while being evaluated. Having said that, there can be no doubting that this is a powerful, and capable, piece of software.

It is only fair to make this observation at the outset: SILQ does many, many things that BarBooks does not attempt to do. For example, it allows for the creation of matter-specific chronologies. It also allows for the creation of a database of master authorities (including storage of a copy of the authority or a link to an online copy) which can then be used to generate matter-specific lists of authorities. It provides a document management system, automatically storing documents generated by SILQ in user-specified locations. It is also highly-customisable, a feature that is both a blessing and a curse.

The software itself is a standalone app available in Windows and Mac versions. There is a SILQ Plus version available for Windows only which allows multi-user access to the data (which requires a copy of Microsoft's SQL Server). While there is the option to purchase outright for \$2,400 this does not include ongoing upgrade and support which must be purchased separately. Most users opt for the subscription program, which is \$60 per month, or \$30 per month during the readers' year. These prices are exclusive of GST. There is also a mobile version of SILQ which requires SILQ Plus (which is Windows only at this time) and therefore was not able to be reviewed by the author.

Download and installation was relatively straightforward. The setup process is quite detailed, and the setup wizard provides useful commentary to the user as to how some of the information will be used. Some aspects of it seem a little unusual, however. There is no specific prompt for a mobile telephone number, nor a specific prompt for a direct line and a general chambers switch number (there is a prompt for 'Phone 1' and 'Phone 2', but no indication as to how they will be used in the default letterhead). The usual prompts to input rates are present, but the only default options are for an Hourly or a Daily Rate. Creating a rate for, say, a particular activity such as attending a mention or a directions hearing can only be done once the setup process is complete, and a matter has been created. You will then find the 'Define Global Activity/Sundry Rates' as an option when you try to create a new time entry from the Matter tab (more on that below). It cannot be done in the general preferences, is not particularly intuitive, and required a session with the helpdesk to work it out.

The setup process takes you through regional settings, something that seems unnecessary. It allows for the creation of 'Accounts' which will be familiar to users of MYOB, and SILQ is preloaded

with a set of accounts that most users will never need to alter. The next step in the process is setting interest rates. By default the 'Calculation Method' is set to Compound, which is curious given the calculation of interest on a compounding basis would seem to be impermissible under the Uniform Law. It allows for the input of multiple rates from a specified 'Effective Date', but this is actually less useful than it seems given the way SILQ calculates interest (see below). The setup continues through a section to insert Exchange Rates, again probably superfluous for most users as part of an initial setup process.

The next sections provides for the user to select the location of templates and where documents will be saved to, as well as the 'Folder naming strategy' and the 'File naming strategy'. These really make sense once you've had an opportunity to use the document-creation capabilities of SILQ and one suspects most users will simply adopt the default parameters. There are default 'Statement Settings', which is preloaded text containing the various notices required under the Uniform Law for documents such as invoices and the limited liability notice required under the professional standards legislation. The setup then enables you to edit 'Lookup Tables' that are used extensively throughout SILQ for the insertion of text. Again, this will make more sense once the user has become familiar with SILQ, and is probably unnecessary as part of the setup.

SILQ comes preloaded with a sample data file that can be used to familiarise yourself with the functionality of SILQ. It is a fully-featured fully-editable file except that it is date limited, and does not synchronise with Outlook.

As with BarBooks, the heart of the day-to-day use of SILQ begins with the creation of matters. This is a little more cumbersome than it is in BarBooks because you must select an instructing solicitor and cannot create a new matter without allocating a solicitor to it. As time goes by, and more solicitors are added to the contacts list, this becomes less of an issue. There is the option to change from the default rates for the specific matter, although only the hourly and daily rates are displayed. For some reason the default Activity Rates (if they have been created) are not displayed in the 'Rates' tab of the New Matter setup and so there is no immediate prompt to consider whether or not the default rates should be used for the particular matter. Other tabs to include information about the particular case (such as the various court details) are also available.

One useful compliance feature is that if you don't insert a costs agreement date it will prompt you to make sure you want to create the matter without inserting a costs agreement date before it will allow you to save it. Another useful compliance feature is that it prompts (but doesn't require) an estimate to

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be given. SILQ has the capacity to alert you when the costs associated with a matter reach a certain percentage of the given estimate. It will also include the estimate in the costs agreement.

Creation of a costs agreement is a little less obvious than it is in BarBooks. You need to highlight the name of the matter, click on the 'Documents' button which then brings up a dialogue box with a directory tree listing all of the available templates. It is a little overwhelming at first, particularly if you haven't been through a demonstration with SILQ's sales or support team. By default the 'costs agreement' is in fact a template called 'Fee Agreement' (although the document itself uses the term 'Costs Agreement' when it is generated). It is fairly bare-boned and most users would probably want to have SILQ adapt their existing costs agreement document (which is a process readily achieved through the support network).

The document creation process then generates the relevant document (in this case a costs agreement) as a Word document and prompts the user to 'Save as a pdf', specify a different name or location for it to be saved to, not save it as a pdf, or to turn off the 'Save as PDF' feature altogether. This function had the occasional glitch, as sometimes instead of creating a pdf of the generated document it created a pdf of this article instead!

There are a couple of ways of entering your time. One way, similar to BarBooks, is from within the Matters tab, by highlighting the name of the matter and clicking on 'Time and Billing'. It then opens up the matter and presents the Work in Progress tab which lists unbilled activity (there are also separate tabs which display invoices and receipts). From there you can create a new Time Entry (or an activity Entry or Sundry Entry), create a new Timer, or create a new Matter Expense. You have to include 'Invoice Text', and clicking in that text box brings up a new dialogue box called 'Enter Text'. This is a recurring feature throughout SILQ. You have the option to lookup commonly-used text items (these are customisable in the System Settings) or you can type in your own text. As you type, it brings up the first item in the lookup table that matches the text as it is typed, and once the matching item appears you can click on 'Type as Text' or Tab then Return to select the text. Another way to enter time is from the Day Book tab where you can quickly create multiple entries for multiple matters from the one location. This method does not automatically bring up the text entry dialogue box, or prompt entries from partially typed text. However, there is a small pencil icon that can be clicked to enable that functionality for each entry.

Activating timers can only be achieved from the Work In Progress tab of a particular matter, accessible from the Time and Billing section of the Matters tab. Hit 'New Timer'

and it brings up a Timer dialogue box which you can 'Start' immediately, later filling in the Invoice Text details to allow it to be saved. The timer does not have a pause function, but as the timer does not round up to the nearest 15 minute unit (or whatever other user-defined unitised time period has been chosen) stopping and starting the timer has the same effect. You can have multiple timers open at a time, and they appear together on the left hand side of the screen (by default...this is also customisable). They are identified by the matter's short name but there is no other identifying information to the user which timer is for which particular activity. To do that you need to go into the timer itself. The fact that it does not round up creates an issue if you bill to the nearest 15 minute (or other time period) unit. There is a workaround for this, but it is not elegant.

Invoices can also be prepared from a number of different locations. One is from the Time and Billing section of the Matters tab. Simply select a matter, click on 'Prepare an Invoice', and select the unbilled activity you wish to invoice (and matter-related expenses, if any). A similar process can be undertaken from the Invoices tab by clicking on 'Create Invoice' and selecting the appropriate matter from the pop-up window. By default none of the unbilled activity or disbursements is selected, although there is a Tag All button that rectifies that position. Hitting 'Create Invoice' then brings up a dialogue box enabling an override of the total amount, the editing of invoice details and addition of comments, and for a discount to be applied. Click 'Save' and you then get a series of Invoice-specific Document Packs or you can generate the invoice only. One Document Pack, 'Invoice – Email' will generate the invoice as a pdf and then attach it to an email addressed to the relevant solicitor (with their email address prefilled if it is part of the solicitor's contact details). The downside of this is that you don't get to see the invoice before it is attached to the email to vet it, and if there is something wrong with it (a spelling error, for example) then you need to delete the invoice and then regenerate it.

There is one other thing to note in relation to using SILQ to email documents, at least for Mac users. SILQ's system settings give you the option of which mail program to use. By default it is set to 'Default'. However, it does not seem to recognise Apple Mail as a default mail program (it in fact opens up Outlook) and so Apple Mail users need to go into the System Settings and choose 'Mail'. This should probably be included as part of the setup process.

To charge interest one needs to highlight the relevant invoice and then go to the Tools menu and select 'Calculate Interest'.

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It then calculates the interest amount, and from there gives you the option of creating an invoice. In the Comments section relating to the invoice (but not on the invoice itself) it sets out the rate used and for how many days. However, there is a flaw in the way SILQ calculates interest. It calculates interest from the due date (ie 30 days from the date of issue) as opposed to the date of issue of the invoice, but it does so at the rates applicable from time to time according to the Interest Rates table in the System Settings, rather than the rate as at the date of issue of the invoice over the entire period. This is contrary to the requirements of the Uniform Law, at least where the interest rate increases after the date of issue of the invoice.

Expenses can be entered in a number of different ways. Matter expenses can be entered through the Time and Billing section of a particular matter, and all expenses (including matter-related expenses) can be entered through the 'Spend Money' tab. One irritating feature is that you can't simply tab through the fields and type in the account code. Moving the cursor into the account code box automatically brings up the Chart of Accounts and requires you to select the account. This will annoy keyboard warriors.

Like BarBooks, SILQ allows for bank reconciliation although it is a more manual process with users having to download their online banking data and import it into SILQ. SILQ is, however, working on developing a Xero integration which will allow for direct bank feeds.

As noted above the SILQ template system is very sophisticated. There are hundreds of different field codes available to generate any manner of template documents. There are pdf manuals and online video tutorials describing in detail how to do this. And the SILQ support staff are also available to assist in the creation of templates as well. It is a process that seems daunting at first, but with a little perseverance opens up a world of possibility.

Upon installation SILQ creates its own Folder on the user's hard drive, and within that folder there is a directory structure where the documents generated by SILQ are stored in accordance with user-defined preferences, but which by default create a new folder for each matter into which all matter-related documents are saved. This automatic document management is a powerful feature of SILQ.

### Conclusion

SILQ has obvious advantages over BarBooks that make it a complete practice management package in a way that BarBooks, in fairness, is not attempting to be.

When comparing them in the areas where they truly compete,

then the advantages are less obvious. SILQ offers a more complicated accounting package that will appeal to users familiar with MYOB's accounting structure, or have more complicated accounting needs outside the mere recording of practice-related incomings and outgoings. The more sophisticated accounting system is accompanied by more powerful reporting. Having said that, BarBooks' user-friendly interface may be more appealing for users whose accounting needs are less ambitious. It is certainly much more intuitive than SILQ, and SILQ has a lot of functionality that many (perhaps most) will simply never use.

BarBooks does have the disadvantage that it does not provide a document management capability for the accounting documents it generates. That's not necessarily a bad thing if, like the author, you tend to store documents by type rather than by matter. If BarBooks can build in user-customisable preferences that directed particular types of documents into particular subfolders then that would take care of the document management for many users.

SILQ's interface needs to be updated, as do its menus. One can't help but think that some of the glitchy behaviour (it often spasms when executing complicated multi-step tasks such as generating document packs) suggests some updated coding might be in order. Nevertheless, it remains a powerful workhorse for the busy practitioner.

BarBooks is the relative newcomer, and while it was released as a relatively basic package it has made significant advances in its short life span. The developers are responsive to user feedback and even during the course of preparing this article queries by the author have prompted changes to the software, some of which have been rolled out and others are works in progress. Being cloud-based has distinct advantages in terms of mobility and accessibility, and its direct import bank reconciliation facility is a time-saver. The iOS app provides a useful mobile data input capability, although at this stage it is somewhat lacking in terms of the matter-related information it provides. For Mac users who do not have access to the mobile version of SILQ because it requires SILQ Plus, this currently gives BarBooks a distinct advantage, although a mobile version compatible with all versions of SILQ is planned for 2017.