



## Technology and Law Firm Management

By Jeremy T. Elman

My office is in Miami, yet most of my cases and colleagues are in faraway states. How can I practice law this way? One word: technology. My files are all maintained electronically, I correspond with other lawyers using video and Web conferencing, and my court filings are done via the Internet. Technology enables me to work anywhere. People like me are changing the practice of law because we use technology in our practice every day. Technology innovations in legal practice will become standard as my generation moves into management and leadership roles.

One of my mentors was told when he was a young lawyer that the road to partnership was "paved" with paper cuts. Those lawyers spent years digging through boxes of documents and thumbing through legal texts. No more. Now that road is increasingly paved with computer clicks. The traditional law office, with a receptionist, secretary, paralegal and attorney writing longhand briefs is disappearing. In its place is a whole new world.

Here are a few major technology-related changes:

### PAPERLESS OFFICES

Many lawyers store files electronically on password-protected Web sites or in databases. No more overflowing paper files stored in cramped file rooms. This not only is efficient for organization, but also environmentally friendly. A few mouse clicks can lead to thousands, if not millions, of files stored in one easily-accessible location.

### INSTANTANEOUS COMMUNICATION

Everything in legal practice can now happen with a few computer clicks. Lawyers can now close deals and file

briefs electronically. Documents can be sent securely through e-mail without worrying about couriers, Federal Express or unreadable facsimiles. Blackberries and other wireless devices enable conversations and resolutions without unnecessary meetings, phone calls or other activities that add up on a client's bill.

### GEOGRAPHIC FLEXIBILITY

Remote access to servers and databases means allows lawyers to work from anywhere these days. There is no reason that lawyers are chained to their offices and desktop computers anymore. While this means a vacation may no longer be a vacation, it also means that flexibility across the work week (and weekend) is greatly enhanced.

Those in my generation, so-called Generation X, are comfortable with these innovations. We grew up with the Internet and e-mail. We think that the legal industry is simply catching up with the rest of the world. As Gen-X lawyers continue to mature in their careers, technology use will become the norm rather than the exception. For example, legal assistants will have a new role. They will become database managers and experts in electronically filing documents and no longer taking dictation and answering phones. Law firms will take advantage of innovation to improve efficiency, communication and flexibility. Clients will demand that lawyers cut down on bills involving actions that can be done more efficiently with technology.

But what about those already entrenched in law firm management? Many managers, lawyers and non-lawyers alike, are resistant to technology. Lawyers have long maintained that their skills are from a different era and are not enhanced by technology. After all, providing clients with reasoned judgment is the hallmark of an attorney, not dealing with technology. Soon, however, they will have no choice. Clients will demand that lawyers be as

efficient as those in other industries. And the new generation, who is comfortable with technology, will ensure that the necessary investment is made.

So how does a manager get his or her firm up to speed? Here are some suggestions for how law firm managers can take advantage of technology:

- Form teams of lawyers and staff to be trained side-by-side in new technology, possibly by using an IT consultant;
- Start a technology committee at your firm to explore how to utilize new products and software and invite vendors who specialize in legal software to speak;
- Speak with younger attorneys at your firm to understand what software they use and how they use it.
- Search the Internet for resources on "legal technology," or read a book on the subject;
- Attend a CLE (continuing legal education) or other course on technology or new software; and
- Join a professional organization with a technology arm.
- There is no one solution to suddenly turn the entire office into tech-gurus. Embracing technology now will benefit the entire office, as every skill learned makes your team that much more valuable. In these uncertain economic times, clients and lawyers are looking for every edge they can get. Managers can ensure that they are offering both their clients and lawyers a new skill set that will serve them well in the future.

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