

Legal Administration and Technology

Using technology to your advantage can actually increase productivity in your office. Imagine if you could open a new client file, create a letter to that client, fax the letter and “file” the initial documents away without ever leaving your chair. It is possible.

Speaking of technology, to view this material online or to obtain the PowerPoint presentation, please go to www.ramoslawblog.com and search for Legal Administration and Technology Presentation.

Basic Hardware Needs of the Law Office

The *basic hardware* needs of almost any office have probably not changed much in several years. However as technology changes so do our needs. In some cases it eliminates equipment and in others it adds to it. The basic hardware found in a firm would be:

1. Telephone
2. Computers (and Server)
3. Copier/Printer
4. Scanner
5. Fax
6. Cost recovery equipment

Telephones ... need I say more! We certainly can't operate without the telephone. There are many systems on the market today with the latest being digital and/or Voice Over Internet Protocol (VoIP). This is a case of out with the old and in with the new. The traditional analog systems have been replaced by digital systems. These systems offer firms some pretty neat little tools and tricks. For instance, some systems offer a whisper page where you can actually “whisper” to an attorney who is currently on the phone. Your attorney will hear you but the other party will not. The attorney can then hit a button sending you a preset text message letting you know what to do with the caller.

VoIP systems offer great flexibility as to the location of the user. You could actually set up a VoIP handset in your home office and be able to answer phones for the office, buzz the person in the office next door, check voicemail, etc. all as if you were sitting in your office. This is wonderful, especially for firms that are offering alternative work arrangements. These systems also offer a “soft phone” which is installed on your laptop and will work while you are out of town (as long as you have a connection to the internet).

The one problem with a VoIP *only* system is that if your internet is down, your telephone is down. Most of us go nuts when we lose email access for 10 minutes, could you imagine if the entire firm’s phone system was down for an hour or more? The solution to this would be to purchase a phone system that offers both digital and VoIP. While in the office the system is digital and is not dependent on the internet and then users can also have a VoIP extension outside of the office.

Computers are, of course, a necessity in any firm. A server can come into play when you have multiple users all needing access to the same documents or programs. Even the smallest firms can benefit from a server. In addition to providing access to shared documents and programs it can help maintain consistency of firm software and allow you to monitor user computers and internet usage.

The copier (and printer) still plays a big role in the majority of law firms. There are a good number of firms attempting to go paperless, and I have heard rumors of at least one firm actually achieving this goal, but there are still a lot of changes to be made before the copier can be fired. However, it soon may be possible to start trading in large copy machines for smaller machines, especially for firms who are already outsourcing large copy jobs.

Scanners are now commonplace in firms. The scanner can be a standalone unit or combined with other office equipment such as the copier or fax machine. The scanner may be black and white or have the ability to scan in color. Most scanners function the same way and how well they integrate into your firm is dependent on the software you have working with it.

Fax machines are also still found in most firms. However, while we're talking about that paperless office, let's replace the fax machine. There are faxing programs out there that allow you to send and receive faxes straight to your email. This can be done with a combination of hardware/software installed at your office, by using the internet or even by using your existing server (and software package).

Finally, you need something to recover your cost. Cost recovery equipment will facilitate this with ease. While this may mean a notepad beside the copier to some of you, there are vendors who provide equipment that hooks into your copier (and other office equipment) and will prevent users from accessing that equipment until a client/matter code is entered. This hardware can be installed on copy machines, scanners and phone systems but can no longer be installed on postage machines due to postal regulations.

Factors to Consider When Evaluating Software and Related Information Management Systems

In addition to the necessary hardware, there are numerous software programs available to make the hardware work better for you. These programs can help with scanning documents, faxing documents, typing documents, case management, billing, running backups, keeping computers "safe", sharing data, and many other tasks.

First things first – find out what products are out there! There are several avenues to keep in touch with the latest programs. First, talk to your peers. Ask other firms what they are using and what works for them. Maybe even ask to come see the program in action. The Association of Legal Administrators, and the local chapter of the ALA, is a great place to start. They also publish a magazine which will often provide some inspiration.

Law Technology News offers an online magazine as well as a print publication which outlines the latest products as well as other tech issues. They also have a resource guide which works similar to a catalog for the various products they have discussed previously. *Law.com* offers a legal technology area online at law.com/tech. The ABA has a legal technology resource center at abanet.org/tech/ltrc/.

These are just some of the areas you can find out about great products. There are also expo shows throughout the year providing an opportunity to see the product.

Once you know which products you might be interested in you need to evaluate how it can be utilized in your office and how it will better the firm as a whole. Will this increase productivity? If so, whose productivity will be increased? What is the implementation time? How long will it take to roll the product out? When all of these are considered you can then determine how soon you can recover the initial cost.

To help get some of these answers you will likely need to talk to your IT department/company. They should be able to research/confirm how this product will integrate with your current system and give you any thoughts they may have on the program. You should also look online for user groups or forums. That will give you some insight into how the program actually works for its customers and what problems you may run into.

Other considerations would be how techno savvy is your firm (the individual users). If you are dealing with someone who is reluctant to switch from overhead slides to PowerPoint then you need to make sure the products you choose are “friendly” enough to convince even those users. You also need to realize that even the greatest programs may have a tag reading “Some Assembly Required”. Speech recognition programs will require some “training” of the system (not just the user); case management software will require that you customize it to your needs; backup software will require that you tell it what you want backed up. But once this initial set up is done the program should work **for you.**

Leveraging Technology for Maximum Productivity

With the proper research into both the software and hardware you can make your firm more efficient, reduce turnover and have a better work environment. Most of the vendors you deal with today are aware what firms want in place. However, you need to let them know what your goal is so they can provide the best solution for you. For instance, your copy lease is up and you’d like to get a copier and scanner all in one. You would also like the scans to be sent straight to your user’s desktop and you want to track

the cost of those scans. Can this be done? Yes! You just need to tell them that you want to do all of these pieces. It may not be one company that sets everything up, you will likely need the copy vendor and the cost recovery vendor and maybe your IT vendor. However, you need to make sure the copy vendor knows what you want to do so that they can make sure you have the right machine in place for the job. Otherwise you may end up having to track how many pages you scanned manually.

There are so many products available and more coming out everyday. As much as we hate to admit it, most of us realize that technology is our friend. Of course I still yell at my computer and want to toss it out the window, but without it my firm would be much less efficient. Put the technology to work for you.

Resources

Below are some resources to help in your technology search. These lists are not inclusive and no one provider is recommended more than any other.

Some of the websites mentioned:

www.ltnresourceguide.com

www.abanet.org/tech/ltrc/

www.law.com/tech

www.alanet.org

www.nch.com.au/scribe

Software to handle Case Management/Billing/Contacts

Needles

ProLaw

PC Law

PracticeMaster

Amicus

Timeslips

Abacus

PerfectLaw

Examples of Document Management Software

iManage

Worldox

Digital Dictation and Speech Recognition

Dragon Naturally Speaking

Express Scribe

Faxing

RightFax

eFax

MyFax

Backup solutions

Symantec

Storage Guardian