

Bar Bytes

End of Year Technology Wrap Up

With the end of the year upon us, it seems like a good time to reflect on what kind of year 2004 was for law office technology, starting with new offerings from the SC Bar. In January 2004, the Bar unveiled its new Web page, with a fresh look, improved functionality and increased online offerings for members. Then, in September, SC Bar members were introduced to Casemaker, an online legal research service that is free to members. With Casemaker, lawyers can use the Internet to search for South Carolina law, federal law and law in nineteen other states. For more information, call the Bar or go to www.sctbar.org/casemaker.

E-Filing

The federal courts continue to make progress in the area of e-filing as part of the comprehensive "Case Management/Electronic Case Files (CM/ECF)" program. The U.S. Bankruptcy Court for the District of South Carolina has required e-filing by lawyers since 2003. The U.S. District Court expects to launch its e-filing system in early 2005, and is urging lawyers to register now. The registration form and other information about the Case Management project is online at www.scd.uscourts.gov/CMECF/index.asp, or you can contact Lois McLeod for more information (803) 253-3527.

The federal courts are not alone; work to bring case management to South Carolina state courts is also in progress. As of summer 2004, the 13th Judicial Circuit (Pickens County Circuit and Magistrate Courts and Greenville County Circuit and Magistrate Courts) is online with the new statewide court case management system. The system allows both lawyers and the public to access a searchable public index of case records. The counties will serve as a model for the other rural counties across the state. Also, Greenville and Charleston counties are currently in the planning stage for electronic filing. Stay tuned to the Judicial Department's Web page for more updates. www.sccourts.org.

Windows XP SP2

Microsoft released Service Pack 2 (SP2), the long-awaited cumulative patch for Windows XP. Almost simultaneously, companies began warning their employees not to download it. The main concern has been that installing SP2 may cause other software and hardware to no longer function properly or at all. Before installing SP2, computer users should check their PC and hardware makers' websites for new drivers or other software patches to insure a smooth update. To learn more, the Microsoft website includes links to information from PC manufacturers and much more about SP2 at www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/sp2/default.mspx.

Spyware, Viruses, Popups

Windows XP Service Pack 2 is all about security, with better protection against viruses, hackers, and worms, and includes Windows Firewall, Pop-up Blocker for Internet Explorer, and the new Windows Security Center. 2004 was the worst year yet for cyberattacks, with costs from attacks estimated in the billions of dollars worldwide. Don't take chances with your firm's computers or the security of your client's electronic information. Make sure everyone in your firm practices "safe computing."

Gadgets

Sometimes gadgets get a bad name, but the fact is many gadgets available today are actually tools that can help glue your law practice together. This year saw widespread acceptance of tiny, portable **USB drives**. USB drives are known by a variety of names, including flash drives, thumb drives, jump drives, keychain drives and pen drives. They can be used in place of a computer disk, CD or zip disk to store data. They come in many sizes and shapes with a storage capacity from 8 megabytes to 2 gigabytes. Just plug them into your computer's USB port and you instantly have a new "drive" letter where you can store documents and more.

Smart phones, or "hybrids," started catching on in a big way, combining cell phones with palm-held computers, cameras and other gadgets. The idea is to simplify things for people who normally carry around both a cell phone and a handheld device. Good idea, but so far only a few hybrid devices have gotten acceptable marks from users and reviewers alike. One is the Treo 600 from PalmOne (the next model, the Treo 650, was expected out at the time of this writing). Don't forget to purchase a hands-free headset for your cell phone (and use it – particularly in automobiles).

Converting documents to **PDF** (portable document format) files is of increasing importance to lawyers, in part due to e-filing requirements. When a document doesn't exist in computer form, the only option is to scan it and create a PDF of the scan. When purchasing a new scanner for your law office, look for one capable of scanning directly to a PDF document.

Remote access to the office computer continues to top the wish list for many lawyers. I have noticed an increase in the number of lawyers who have tried or are using the service GoToMyPC.com, which allows one to connect to one's computer at work from any computer with an Internet connection. A similar product called PCAnywhere is also available. Prices for GoToMyPC.com start at \$19.95 a month for one user (discounts are available for yearly subscriptions).

One of the most talked about products of the year was **Google™** -- with good reason. It consistently outranks all the other search engines on the Web for speed and accuracy. But these days, that's not enough; so Google is offering a range of other products, from their Toolbar to Froogle™, their answer to online shopping sites. I firmly believe the Google Toolbar is a great asset for lawyers, for at least three reasons: 1. It allows one to do a Google search from any Web site (without having to return to Google's home page); 2. It allows one to search for a term or terms easily within a site (example: you've pulled up a particular Web site but can't find what you were looking for. Use the Google Toolbar to search within the current site); and 3. It comes with an optional pop-up blocker, which is easily disabled. Anything that can save busy lawyers time and frustration is an asset, in my book.

Interest in **wireless** networks and wireless Internet is way up in 2004. More law firms are expressing interest in wireless, hoping it will be a simple way to "cut the cord." In theory, working without any wires sounds great, but there are a lot of issues to be addressed first, including security. There are also practical limitations with wireless networking, from the type of

walls in your home or office to interference from other electronics. For more wireless information, go to www.scbar.org/pmap/wirelesslinks.asp.