

# Information Technology - Tool or Weapon?

# The underbelly of the Information Age can be ugly, but it doesn't have to be.



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t has long been said that knowledge is power. In today's **environment**, **a new** twist on this revelation has evolved with the development of the microchip - those who understand technology hold the keys to success.

Unfortunately, power sometimes has a subversive underside, and the human dynamics regarding the use of technology are not clearly defined.

As law firms and corporate legal departments enhance their technological capabilities, the people who work there are forced to grapple with these

than 89 percent work in networked office environments, and 82 percent use e-mail for daily tasks. These trends have created tremendous change in a short period of time.

## **Looking Back**

Twenty years ago, power trickled down from partners to associates, then to paralegals and support staff. Partner longevity determined where names appeared on the letterhead. In a techno-savvy legal environment, power may reside with individuals utilizing

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issues. While information technology should be a treasured tool, sometimes, it is used as a weapon.

Paralegals use e-mail, specialized software programs, cell phones, the Internet and other electronic information storage and retrieval systems on a daily basis. According to the "LEGAL ASSISTANT TODAY Technology Survey 2000" (see March/April 2000), technological expertise can raise a paralegal's visibility. Overall, 78.4 percent of survey respondents indicate they prefer some form of electronic research. More

technology because they are more productive and efficient.

As a result, those individuals possessing technology skills receive performance bonuses and elevated respect within the workplace. Competition may exist to demonstrate value by improving the "bottom line." The measures and nature of success have forever changed.

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are part of the technology decisionmaking process. Paralegals are often the "go-to" people for suggestions about related purchases. In addition, research - in its many forms - has long been their responsibility. Firms and corporations expect 'paralegals to be knowledgeable about electronic information retrieval, electronic filings and online research. The employee who says, "I don't know," may be excluded from the most challenging projects.

## Knowledge vs. Experience

Experienced paralegals may have extensive computer experience or only basic e-mail and PC prowess.

Individuals who have used computers since elementary school and have played countless video games often possess an advantage when new technology is introduced in the workplace. Since their learning curve is sharply decreased, they could be tempted to use this position to elevate their status among more experienced professionals. This knowledge often intimidates other employees who still cling to books and paper as primary information tools.

Knowledge imbalances can lead to difficult situations, even if a power struggle doesn't exist. Let's examine how this might happen. While in the midst of an important deadline, a senior paralegal experiences a software glitch. Unable to fix it himself, he turns to a junior colleague, the "computer expert," also working on an urgent deadline. In this instance, how do you measure whose work is more important? If this junior employee interrupts her project to assist her co-worker, she puts her productivity at risk. If she doesn't help, others may not view her as a team player. There's no correct way to resolve this situation, but possessing knowledge creates consequences that could be misinterpreted or misused.-

Another undermining technique used by those who possess special skills is withholding knowledge. Instead of sharing vital information, they keep it to themselves. They don't take the time to explain how to resolve problems, but always fix it themselves. They become rescuers - office heroes -and enhance their career by withholding knowledge from co-workers. This technique is particularly clever because they appear to be team players. They continue to get pats on the back from partners and see additional bonuses in

their paychecks. Once co-workers become more comfortable with new technology, they will gain confidence and find other resources to obtain solutions. In the long run, withholding information isolates an individual from his or her peers. That paralegal's knowledge may become a weapon for his or her own destruction in a team-oriented workplace.

#### Rise to Meet the Future

if, like many Americans, technology issues give you reason for pause, here are a few tips to help you deal with the introduction of electronic changes in the profession:

- 1 Don't equate lack of knowledge with lack of intelligence. Recognize that change, any change, brings a certain amount of anxiety. Keep it in perspective. Recognize that you have a certain amount of fear and overcome it with additional classes, a few longer days to get up to speed and asking more knowledgeable people in the firm to explain the inside story when new technology is introduced.
- ► Don't accept "quick fixes" on a regular basis.
- ➤ Temporarily put aside your drive to achieve high billable hours. If you invest time to learn the technology, you will quickly make up for the hours possibly lost in the learning curve.
  - Acknowledge that new technology will
- enhance your existing research capabilities, as well as your ability to communicate and negotiate.
   Understand the firm's expectations for
  - use of technology and exceed them.
- ► Appreciate people in your firm or department that are talented technophiles. Don't view them as
- ► threats, but as teachers.

  Technology does not provide all of the answers. People make decisions about how to most effectively implement
- ▶ technology and must be comfortable with its impact.

As technology continues to evolve, it's important to keep abreast of new trends. "Law is an information business," noted technology consultant Michael M. Sherry in "Plugged In," a June 9, supplement to the Fulton County Daily Report that examines the

use of technology in law firms. "This technology, especially with the Internet, is probably one of the greatest advancements in history . ... Law firms that have not embraced the technology are at a great disadvantage."

### **Technological Credibility**

If you are among those blessed with a knack for technology, you have a strategic advantage at the office. Those who use their knowledge wisely gain credibility - a positive mechanism to achieve recognition and get ahead. As Barbara Pagano, president of the consulting firm Executive Pathways, commented, "Credibility influences people more than anything else, especially in today's environment" ("The Keys To Credibility," My Business, the May/June 2000 magazine issue).

To determine your credibility as it relates to technological expertise, consider the following points, adapted from an assessment developed by Pagano.

- 1 Are you honest? Are you truthful about your skill level? Do you use your knowledge wisely and help educate colleagues?
- How consistent are you? Do you help others equally to resolve technology problems? Do you provide assistance only when you're likely to benefit from the exposure?
- Do you stay composed in the face of adverse situations? How do you handle yourself when technology fails? Do you find creative solutions or throw up your hands?
- 1 How competent are you? Technical knowledge is a factor, but people skills also are important. Are you patient when providing explanations? Do you hide behind technology to mask other weaknesses?
- ► How courageous are you? Are you willing to take advice about improving your technology skills?

Ultimately, technology helps us perform our jobs better and enhances the service we deliver to clients. Because it's a relatively new tool in the legal profession, we are still dealing with the challenges it presents - operationally and behaviorally. With these changes, each of us has the power to acquire new skills and knowledge and use our wisdom for workplace progress or for personal gain. Information technology as a tool or a weapon - the choice is up to you. IM