WEB-ENABLED APPLICATIONS
AND SERVICE PROVIDERS

Ellen Freedman, CLM
© 2005 Freedman Consulting, Inc.

Are your eyes already glazed over? For some attorneys — you know who you are — the sight or sound of something even remotely technical causes a reflex shut-down. Eyes glaze over. Ears clog and deafen. The mind numbs. If this describes you, get out the Q-tips, caffeine and eye drops. This is important stuff, and your ability to compete successfully, and even to practice efficiently in the not-so-distant future may depend on it. In return, I promise to be gentle in this article, and try to speak in plain English, keeping the techno-babble to a minimum.

Technology is accelerating so rapidly, that we are moving to a new computing paradigm before many of you even comprehend or ascend to the current model. The current model is the computer network featuring a file server with centralized data storage and backup, and high-powered workstations. Each user utilizes personal productivity software for calendar, rolodex, tasks, and so forth, or firm-wide case management, and there is internet and email access for all, or at least for attorneys and paralegals. In addition, the firm maintains a presence on the internet via its own web site.

Maintaining the technology is expensive, and necessary resources — technically talented people — are in short supply and not easily affordable for the small firm. Upgrading the technology usually requires a firm utilize the work of specialists, particularly when there are programs which are linked to each other (such as Timeslips time and billing with Time Matters case management and QuickBooks accounting), in order to ensure that an upgrade to any one package or to the operating system does not overwrite an essential computer file(s) necessary to maintain the link(s) between programs. Quite commonly, upgrades "crunch" these files, and expertise is required to ascertain which essential file has been altered, and to restore it to re-enable the link(s).

So, too, is training required. Gone are the good old days when one could sit down in front of a product like WordPerfect 5.1–DOS and just start using it. Today's software applications are much more powerful, and more complex. While

one can sit down and learn to use many of these software packages, doing so while also trying to produce work will assure that only the barest minimum of features will be understood and used. In order to ensure successful use of the software, and a good return on your investment, you will need professional training for all users.

Under the new scenario, web-enabled applications and access will rule. What this means is that you will not have to own and maintain your own file server. Your server will be "hosted" off-site by an Application Service Provider (ASP), which will provide and maintain the hardware for you. Security features will be more robust than your own firm could afford. Access to your data will be accomplished over secure high-speed connections, and via the web for road warriors and telecommuters. Firms will be able to purchase applications as they do today, or merely rent them from the ASP, providing a more affordable solution for those firms whose needs may change rapidly over time, or who want to better control cash flow.

The technology required internally at the firm to access and utilize the applications will actually *decrease*, thanks to the ability to tap into the power of the server in what is called a "thin client" model. This means, simply, that the horsepower and computing / processing resides on the server, not the workstation. That means, for example, that an old 486 computer can run software and applications like they are Pentiums. Pretty neat, huh? Ok, you're thinking this is like the "old days" when we had a smart server and dumb terminals. Yes, except now the servers maintained by ASPs are 99.99% fault tolerant, meaning they have so much hardware redundancy built into them that down time is virtually non-existent. So you won't need to buy all that expensive hardware anymore to take advantage of the new, powerful software.

Application Service Providers are fairly new, but you'll be surprised at the names you recognize jumping into the fray in the very near future. For additional information on Application Service Providers contact Network Alternatives (http://www.network-alternatives.com/) First Legal (http://www.1stlegal.com/), RealLegal (http://www.reallegal.com) and West Group (http://www.westworks.com/).

Even more exciting is that more and more software developers are making their software into web-enabled applications. What that means is that you won't need a file server, or in some cases even an ASP to use the software. You simply connect directly to the vendor site via the internet and use the application on their server. Your fee pays for exclusive secure space on their server for your data. There are alternate pricing strategies too, such as renting on a monthly basis instead of purchasing. That means your firm can afford and utilize software

Freedman Consulting, Inc.
(215) 628-9422

previously only affordable to large firms. Software companies from Microsoft to Elite are embracing application rental and web-enabled delivery.

Tomorrow is here today. To restate something I wrote in my very first article for the Pennsylvania Bar Association, "Get on board by getting up to speed, get off the tracks and be quickly bypassed by your peers, or become road kill – it's your choice." Because this latest computing model offers law firms the first real chance to *reduce* the technology budget, utilize more powerful software at an affordable cost, outsource most technical support issues, and refocus energies on the practice of law instead of management of technology, you will be smart to get up to speed and find out what this is all about, and what it can do for your firm. Yes, there are lots of questions to be answered concerning this new paradigm. You must proceed with caution. But the benefits of proceeding clearly warrant your attention.

A version of this article originally appeared in various Pennsylvania County Bar newsletters in the summer of 2000