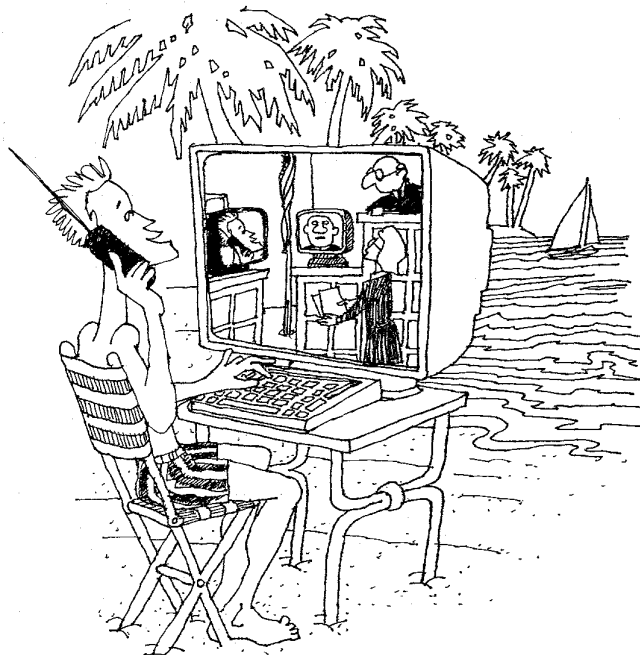


The Info Age law firm

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"Sorry, I can't talk right now; I'm in court."

This column is, in part, a response to Ted Lewis's "Living in real time, side A" (*Computer*, September 1995, pp. 8-10), which says that lawyers do not understand technology and therefore cannot keep pace with change. Lewis also states that technology will be based on speed and customization rather than legal rights. However, he neglects one theorem: Where there is a buck to be made, there is usually someone to make it.

In this regard, I submit that some law firms will not only survive in the Info Age but will even thrive and flourish, as survival of the fittest becomes a truism. A significant contributing factor will be superior technology that lets lawyers do more in less time. These law firms, however, may not have the same look and feel as they do today.

Added flexibility

The Info Age will provide more flexibility and convenience for lawyers. Advanced computing techniques will let them provide legal services from remote locations (for example, the beach) and perform many tasks that were previously performed from the office. In some instances,

tomorrow's courtroom might be merely a videoconference comprising a collection of monitors that let parties litigate from remote locations.

In 1990, David Hambourger¹ wrote in the *American Bar Association Journal*.

The cordless revolution will continue. When coupled with small, powerful, portable computers . . . attorneys will work with greater flexibility, freed from the traditional office setting. The technologies will eliminate travel to many depositions and hearings.

Courts will also be making great strides in using technology. . . . Court rules will be modified to accommodate the electronic filing of many documents.

Only five years later, some of Hambourger's predictions are becoming a reality. The US Patent Office is considering electronic filing of patent applications. Several pilot programs have been initiated to permit the electronic filing of briefs and motions in Prince George's County, Maryland, and Los Angeles County, California. Moreover, several courts, such as the Federal Circuit Court of Appeals in Washington, D.C., already provide electronic access to opinions/decisions.

Strides in automation

With the coming of the Info Age, tasks previously considered cumbersome and expensive will be mechanical and "cheap." One example of how a lawyer's job has already been made easier is the ability to easily retrieve legal research information from on-line legal databases. In 1988, Laurence Klein² wrote for the *American Lawyer*

Most computer database programs provide interfaces for a user to query the contents of the database. These interfaces generally have strict format and protocol requirements, so that a complex search on the contents of the database is anything but simple. Natural language interface protocol may be the answer to demystifying the process.

The purpose of the natural language program is to interpret the language and syntax of the average person into something the databases can comprehend. This eliminates the need to train individuals in the use of database query language and allows nontechnical people to work with the database. . . .

The current state of natural language interfaces is a dramatic improvement over older query languages used for database searches, but still they have a limited vocabulary and comprehend only basic sentence structures. Fully conversational English soon will be available.

And right he was! Both leading legal database providers, Westlaw and Lexis (no, not the car), now provide full natural-language database searches.

Law firms will also take advantage of the Info Age by being better informed and able to facilitate tasks previously done manually. Computer filings represent just one way the Info Age will help lawyers. In 1988, Klein² predicted

Within five to ten years an attorney will be able to have his or her secretary feed a prepackaged "artificially intelligent" litigation support system with all relevant documents of a case. The computer will process the documents automatically and create the litigation database, and the attorney will be able to communicate directly with the system in conversational English both vocally and using the keyboard.

One of the tasks Klein addressed is the capability to automatically group documents by the appropriate legal issue. This will let lawyers access the appropriate documents more efficiently when a particular legal issue arises in court, during deposition, or while preparing court papers.

Eventually, through artificial intelligence, computers will be able to economically and efficiently scan documents, accurately convert them into digital data, and then analyze those documents for the appropriate legal issue. Computers will also extract the key points of a document, write a summary, classify the document, and file it. Thus, to some extent, the tasks attorneys perform today will become automated and consume much less time, resulting in lower legal costs and fewer attorneys (perhaps one of the main benefits of the Info Age). While this prediction may be several years from fruition, Klein² admitted that "the greatest barrier to the commercial viability of an intelligent litigation support system may not be the technology itself, but the overall cost of the individual components." Nevertheless, technology will continue to assist lawyers in making their jobs more efficient.

Postured for success

While it is conceivable that the Info Age will provide such rapid change in technology that today's legal system will be unable

to keep pace, it is equally conceivable that the Info Age will provide the appropriate technology for the Info Age law firm to be successful. As Ted Lewis points out, lawyers as a general breed may not understand technology. However, they generally do understand how technology can assist them and how they can utilize the expertise of those who understand such technology.

Accordingly, the complexion of a law firm will likely be much different in the Info Age than it is today (see Figure 1). For example, law firms will need to be physically or logically integrated with other technology specialists. In fact, internal law firm employees are already working as specialists in administration of word processing, PCs, LANs, and external networks. And many law firms have information technology specialists who can extract information from on-line databases, albeit in a rather primitive manner.

The Info Age law firm must develop a closer relationship with information technology specialists. This will let lawyers more easily and efficiently obtain qualitatively superior information affecting the legal practice. For example, the law firm might be networked with specialists that "police" the Net for the pirating of software, defamation, or trademark infringement. The specialist will then immediately inform the law firm of the infraction, and the firm will react with lightning speed.

WHILE IT MAY BE TRUE that many lawyers are in for a rude awakening, the possibilities are great for the Info Age law firm. The same technology that threatens the survival of some is the innovation that will enable the prosperity of others.

References

1. D. Hambourger, "The Future of Office Tech," *American Bar Association J.*, Jan. 1990, p. 72.
2. L. Klein, "Applying Artificial Intelligence to Litigation," *American Lawyer*, 1988 (tech. issue), p. 12.

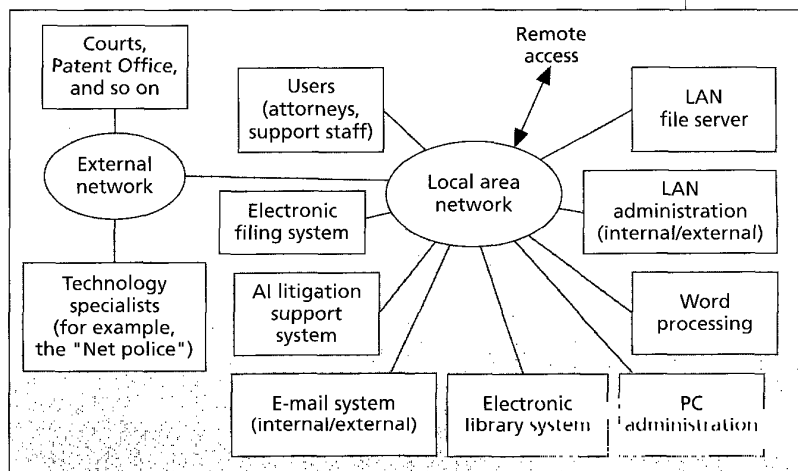


Figure 1. An organizational chart and computer architecture for the Info Age law firm.