Had It with Technology? Remember the (Not So) Good Ol' Days

By Paul Sullivan

It's easy to get frustrated when computers don't work like they should, when the copier is down, or when e-mail is undeliverable. These little irritations, which seem so big when they happen, are part of running a law office in these rapidly changing times.

But technology has made our lives so much easier that we're spoiled. Let's compare what we take for granted today to what people had to endure right after I got out of college. No, I wasn't wearing a raccoon coat, but it's been a few years.

Life before e-mail

There was no e-mail, no fax, no Federal Express, so the only way to get important documents to another lawyer or client was to deliver them in person or send them special delivery via the post office. There were no cell phones, so if you needed to make an important call away from the office, you probably had to find a phone booth. Since most people didn't have calling cards then, you had to be sure you had enough change.

There was no voice mail, so the only way to check your messages at the office was to call your secretary. Of course, after closing time you had to wait until morning – or drive to the office. The only way to check your stocks was to call your broker. If you needed quick cash, you had to find someone who would cash your check – no ATMs in those days.

Research on any topic required a trip to the library. Instead of a Palm Pilot, you had to carry a Day Timer, which was inconvenient because of its sheer size. If you needed to do a quick calculation, you had to do it on paper. Those little calculators that people give away as promotions today cost more than $1,500 in the late 1960s.

The hottest office product was the
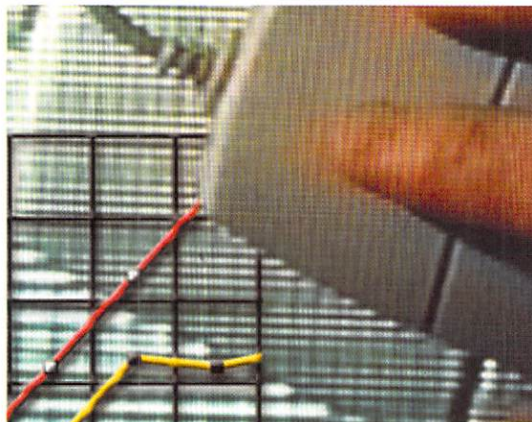
A look at how far we've come in law office technology in the last 30-plus years.

IBM Selectric. It was introduced in 1961 and featured an interchangeable "golf ball" typing element which replaced the standard type bars. This revolutionary product would ultimately represent 75 percent of the typewriter market in the 1960s. It wasn't until 1973 that IBM introduced its wondrous Correcting Selectric – finally, you could correct mistakes on the keyboard. The price was $620. A box of a dozen ribbons was $33.50 and correcting tape was $14 for a box of six. How did you correct errors before that? How about an eraser – and don't forget the carbons.

Life before copiers

Yes, carbon paper. Few offices had copiers. Can you imagine having to erase an error on every carbon as well as the original? And the erasures often had to be so clean they couldn't be obvious to someone else – otherwise, the typist had to start all over. One secretary said her attorney would hold the paper up to the light and if he could see any erasures, she had to do it over. An-

other secretary remembered typing the original plus six carbons of workers' compensation documents. Needless to say, the last copy was hard to read.

For those who could afford copiers, the copies were so poor that courts and even other attorneys rarely accepted them. Copies for the most part were used only internally.

The first plain paper copier was developed by Xerox in 1959, but was too expensive for most offices. In the 1960s, many offices used the 3M Thermofax copier. The Thermofax used a heat sensitive process, literally burning the image into the paper. The paper was brittle and faded so that it could hardly be read. If you folded or crushed it, it would shatter. Remember the tulip on the paper?

Other copiers used a liquid process, but the resulting copy weighed so much it was too expensive to mail. The exercise of just making a copy was almost not worth the effort. If you needed large quantities of the same document, they were often prepared on a duplicating machine. Many schools used them; you may remember getting those handouts with the purple ink (there was nothing better than a good whiff of that duplicator fluid on freshly processed paper).

You created the original by typing on a stencil that actually cut holes in it. You placed it on a spirit duplicator machine, and the multiple copies were run. Of course, if you made an error on the stencil, you had to use a special chemical to fill the hole before making a correction. If you made too many errors, you had to start over.

In the early 1970s, in a prelude to today's toner machines, one copy manufacturer came up with a "cold toner" process. The toner was actually pressed on the paper, but not heated like it is today. As the copies aged, the print would

literally fall off the paper.

"Take this down, Miss Finch..."

Shorthand was the choice of attorneys for dictation, but many used the old belt-style Dictaphone machines. The belt dictators actually scored the belt and made a track like you'd find on an old 33-rpm record. Secretaries tell me that the sound quality was terrible.

The secretaries who took shorthand would sometimes take dictation for an hour, go back to their desk to type out what they took down, and end up having to retype the whole document because they couldn't figure out what their shorthand meant or because the attorney made changes afterwards. Attorneys at that time did seem to be more aware of how hard it was to get a document error free, so they were more careful when dictating. One secretary told me her attorney actually wrote out the document in long hand before he dictated so the number of retypes was reduced. How's that for productivity?

Life before PCs

Application software as we know it today was virtually nonexistent. Hardware was king, and manufacturers could provide only primitive applications with their machines. Three companies dominated the office machine market – IBM, Burroughs, and NCR. There were no law firm specific packages available at that time.

IBM dominated the "computer" market; Burroughs and NCR ruled the accounting-machine market. Computers with their punch cards, core memory, tape drives, and disk packs were only seen in the largest companies – primarily because of their cost. Each computer system required a special room, special air conditioning, and a fully staffed data processing department with programmers, operators, and data entry personnel. Almost all computer programs ran in a batch mode (that means one program at a time with several steps in a required sequence). Data communication within or between businesses was almost nonexistent.

Smaller businesses couldn't afford computers, so they used accounting machines. They were 100 percent mechanical, weighed well over 100 pounds, sat on a special stand, and had a carriage, usually from 15" to 22" wide. The operator sat at the machine and entered numbers on a keyboard. All the data was printed on customer, vendor, employee, and general account ledger cards. These mighty machines could add, subtract, subtotal, and total on the ledgers as well as provide some balancing totals – such as total debits and credit to compare to a prelist.

The most popular application on the accounting machine was the preparation of a side by side A/R ledger and statement showing charges and payments. All alphanumeric information had to be prepared on a typewriter – unless your business could afford an addressograph, a machine that made metal plates to imprint names and addresses on envelopes and other documents.

The more sophisticated accounting machines could keep several totals at the same time, so the really hot application was payroll. You could prepare an employee ledger card, payroll check, and payroll journal at the same time. Totals for year to date earnings, federal withholding, and FICA tax would print on the ledger card. In addition, your accumulation of deductions would print on the payroll journal. These more sophisticated machines also had an alphanumeric keyboard so you could actually type the name of the employee on the check.

This was "state of the art technology" in those days, and it wasn't inexpensive. The average price of an accounting machine to do the primitive functions ranged from $3,000-$5,000 1960s dollars depending on features, and the sophisticated ones ran from $6,000-$13,000.

Worth the headaches

So put your frustrations with current technology in perspective. Today's electronic devices make us so productive that they're worth the headaches. On the other hand, if you've been saying to yourself as you read this article, "Gee, this sounds like my office," then you're not facing the frustrations of modern technology. And heaven help you and your clients. ■

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