

Establishing a Training Ground

By Daniel J. Siegel

Law offices often make decisions or changes in their operations that cost significant amounts of money, yet they are sometimes hesitant to invest even a small amount in technology, including the training necessary to improve their day-to-day operations. By ignoring the means by which technology can make things easier, they are stubbornly clinging to the belief that the old way of handling paper and managing their time is still the best and most efficient method of doing business.

In fact, by doing their work the “old-fashioned” way, most tasks take longer to accomplish. Every time lawyers, paralegals or secretaries use their computers inefficiently, they are “wasting time,” not in the sense that they aren’t doing anything, but because they do not get the maximum benefit from the technology they have. While no one expects every person to be a “geek,” it is not unreasonable to require all employees to have a minimum level of skills so that they can achieve more in less time.

TRAIN, TRAIN, TRAIN, LEARN, LEARN, LEARN

Were you trained to drive a car? Do you take continuing education courses and attend seminars and programs to enhance your professional knowledge? Do you want to learn more so that you can do your job more effectively? Hopefully, the answer to each of these questions is “yes.” The same answer should apply to technology. Perhaps you have received training in some specialized programs you use, but have you been trained how to use Windows, Word, Outlook and the other programs that you rely on – possibly even more than you rely upon that specialized legal-specific program your firm uses?

For various reasons, most people have never

been trained in the rudimentary programs so crucial to their daily activities. Many high schools, for example, require students who graduate to have a working knowledge of Word, Excel and PowerPoint. But do they teach the students how to use the programs? Generally not. On the other hand, students from elementary through high school must graduate with certain levels of proficiency in math, science, history and other subjects; however our schools do not expect students to learn those subjects through osmosis.

Why is computer software treated differently?

While students may not need four years of Microsoft Word training, a semester of training would help them immeasurably – just as students who were “forced” to learn typing are more adept at the keyboard than their “hunt and peck” counterparts. Think about how much time those proficient typists save. In many cases they also eliminate the need to hire a full-time secretary.

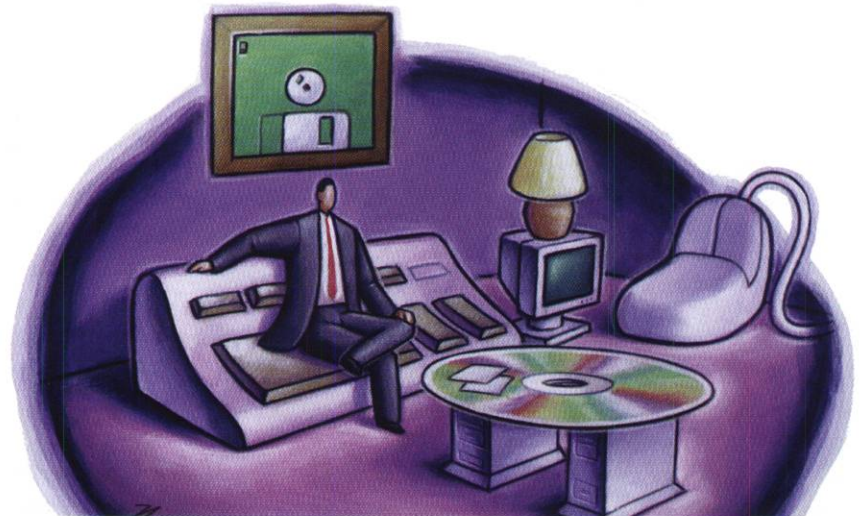
The bottom line is that to improve productivity, law firms must be committed to improving the technology skills of all attorneys and support staff, including:

- Requiring all attorneys to have minimum typing/keyboard skills, and training those attorneys without such skills;
- Systematically assessing the computer skills of all staff;
- Providing mandatory skills training for all software used by the firm;
- Encouraging remote access and other ways for attorneys to maximize time out of office; and,
- Creating firmwide forms and templates, thereby standardizing documents within the firm and/or practice groups/teams.

HOW MUCH TRAINING IS NEEDED?

Training remains at the center of any effort to improve efficiency firmwide. There are two types of computer training – general and software-specific. General computer training is what every computer user needs. General training covers the basics, such as how to turn the computer on, view file directories, copy and erase files, change subdirectories and drives, and run simple programs. It also can and should include ways of customizing computers to make them easier and more efficient for the users. This type of knowledge is fundamental to the successful operation of many computer programs. Specialized software, such as training in case management and other programs, requires software-specific training.

People with limited backgrounds in computer usage benefit greatly from training, even for the simplest programs. While experienced computer users can generally run simple software with little or no training,



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even they would benefit from learning how to use a program's more advanced features.

There are several ways to determine if training is needed. The first step is to listen to the advice of the company that developed the software. If a software company says that training is highly recommended, that usually means training is absolutely essential. If the software company says that some users will need training and some will not, that usually means that a select few have used the software with no training but the vast majority need it. If the software company says that virtually anybody can run the software without training, that means experienced users can easily run the software but that novices will struggle without training.

For any office to benefit fully from existing or new technology, a commitment should be made to offer regularly scheduled training for all staff and attorneys. In most cases, one- to two-hour classes geared toward the practical needs of users are the most effective.

Training should be provided in basic programs such as Windows and the Microsoft Office Suite (Word, Outlook, Excel, PowerPoint and Access), as well as any specialized software used at the firm. Attorneys and staff must be made aware that training is an ongoing process, and that increased proficiency will benefit not only the firm's clients, but also the attorneys and staff (e.g., advise your staff that increased proficiency is a factor in determining salaries, bonuses and other decisions).

With regard to specialized or legal-specific programs, every company claims its software is easy to use. It depends more on the user's computer experience and knowledge however, than it does on the program's actual ease of use.

Most law firms view training as an expense that they would like to avoid at all costs. When compared with the low prices of personal computers, the cost of training can appear quite high. Software is not inexpensive, however, and the cost of not training employees when it is truly needed is the potential waste of all the money invested in the software. ■

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