



THE MINIMUM TECHNOLOGY PLATFORM FOR A SOLO PRACTITIONER: DO THE MATH WHEN CONSIDERING INVESTING IN TECHNOLOGY

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If you're venturing out into your own practice today, whether you're in your twenties or eighties, you had better be prepared to make an investment in a certain level of technology. I refer to technology not just in terms of hardware and software purchases and internet connectivity, but also in terms of obtaining adequate training to make use of the tools you purchase.

If you think you can perform on a level on par with your peers without using the technological tools which are today's established "standard of practice", you're mistaken. At the least you will be unable to compete effectively on an economic basis. At the worst, you will be exposing yourself to allegations of malpractice.

Let's start with the most basic element of law firm life: document production. Every single attorney nowadays should be able to locate a file on a computer, open it, edit it, print it, save it, and close it. You should also be able to copy it (yes, there are attorneys who can't work a copier even today) and fax it (ditto the previous comment). This is the bare minimum level of productivity that should be acceptable. The legal secretary is becoming a rare and expensive commodity, and you cannot always count on having someone "in the chair" when you need something which is time sensitive. You can't afford to be totally helpless without administrative support. I'm not saying you should be an expert touch typist, but you should be able to manage the functions listed above. And the more adept you become, the better your bottom line will be as you become less dependent on staff.

You should additionally consider purchasing a good quality scanner. A good scanner like the Fujitsu ScanSnap!, which scans black & white and color, simplex and duplex, and has an automatic sheet feeder which holds up to 25 pages at a time at just the push of a button, has a street price of about \$399, and that includes a full copy of Adobe Acrobat. A good scanner will enable you to embrace the paper-independent office concept, whereby you scan in any significant documents, photos, etc from the outside world as they arrive, and maintain your files electronically. Disk space is cheap. By keeping your files electronically you can annotate, index, sort, and back up the information. You can keep a safe copy off-site, providing protection from disaster like fire or flood. You can carry it to the client's office or court on a CD, flash or zip drive. And you can access it from anywhere in the world through an internet connection using a modem and laptop. You can save hundreds of hours

of staff typing throughout the year by scanning in outside documents which require editing, and converting them to editable text using optical character recognition (OCR). And you can eliminate lots of expensive linear feet of filing cabinet space.

Because matters require careful tracking of a tremendous amount of information, from contacts, experts, and referral sources, to insurance company claim numbers, events, and to-dos, it is very wise to invest in case management software. Additional features like pop-up timers for tracking time, and links to billing packages for billing that time, (or integrated billing capabilities), make them particularly efficient.

Do the math. If having all the case-related information at your fingertips in a couple of mouse clicks saves you only 15 minutes per day, at your billable rate you will have recouped your investment within one to three months month. That's just a no-brainer. On top of that, the features built in for tracking deadlines and tasks will help you stay on top of client demands and avoid committing malpractice.

Case management software comes in a variety of flavors. Some are litigation-oriented , and some of those are more attuned to plaintiff or defense. There are packages designed for other areas of practice, and some which are great for general practice. Some packages include billing capability, and some also include general ledger capability – they call these “front and back office combinations.” Most will include docket control and conflict checking. Of course, the more areas of functionality included in a package, the more expensive it will be.

Before you conclude that an integrated package is “too” expensive to buy, do the math. How much will it cost you to purchase separate packages to achieve the same level of functionality? If you purchase less expensive but separate packages, you must pay experts to “link” those packages together, so you do not have to do repetitive data entry in each package. When one of the packages upgrades, it can break the link between the packages, requiring you to again retain the services of an expert to restore the link. Plus, the integration links are limited in the amount of data which gets exchanged, and in which direction information can flow.

On the other hand, you may like the functionality of some of the individual packages better than the same component in a multi-function package. For example, Client Profiles is one of those all-in-one front and back office packages. But you may decide that you like QuickBooks general ledger much better than the general ledger part of Client Profiles, and therefore decide to go with a “tried-and-true” combination like QuickBooks (general ledger) with and Time Matters (case management) and Billing Matters (the billing component from the same publisher) as your solution.

Maybe you're thinking perhaps you don't need the general ledger software. Again, do the math. It not only prepares your Profit and Loss and Balance Sheet for you whenever



needed at the touch of a button, (rather than wait for your accountant), but it manages your payables as well, and can produce your payroll and payroll tax returns. Assuming it just saves you eight hours of an accountant's time over the course of a year, well, you broke even before the first hour was saved, so don't even bother to calculate further!

And do you really need Time & Billing software? Only if you want to get your bills out timely so you can get the cash in without having to dip into a line of credit, track time and costs, track trust deposits and withdrawals, know which clients are profitable and which are not, and know who owes you what. Too expensive? Do the math. If you try to manually do your billing I guarantee you will have at least a 20% "shrinkage" factor to your inventory of time and costs as they fall through the cracks. If your gross billings for the year are \$250,000, that means that you can improve your bottom line by about \$4,000 in just one year without working any harder. Ok you say, if you just pay enough extra attention you can save the money on the software without the shrinkage. Ok, let's say for a moment that I believe that you may in fact be able to reduce the shrinkage to 10% with devotion of enough hours and diligence on your part. What's the cost of those hours that could have otherwise been billable or spent marketing your practice? You're probably tired of hearing this: do the math.

The bottom line is that when you do a proper analysis, instead of just having a knee-jerk reaction to the cost, you will discover that you cannot afford *not* to invest in and use at least these tools if you want to work as efficiently and profitably as possible.

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