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Where Have All the Computers Gone? Survey Checks Out Law Firm Usage (with R. Shiels)

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Where Have all the Computers Gone?

Survey Checks Out Law Firm Usage

BY RONALD W. STAUDT AND ROSEMARY SHIELS

I f you walk the corridors of the largest American law firms, you will see a computer on the desk of three out of every four lawyers, and, of course, a telephone on every desk. If the trends of the past seven years continue, computers will be as pervasive as phones within two or three years.

The Chicago-Kent Center for Law and Computers began conducting an annual survey in 1985 of the 500 largest law firms in the United States to monitor their use of technology. The surveys in the 1980s showed a steady shift toward lawyer use of computing in practicing law.

Since 1985, the number of attorneys with workstations on or near their desks has risen from 7 percent to 70 percent. In 1992, 151 firms reported that there were 17,633 workstations on lawyers' desks, representing 70 percent of the 25,212 lawyers in the reporting firms. See Figure 1.
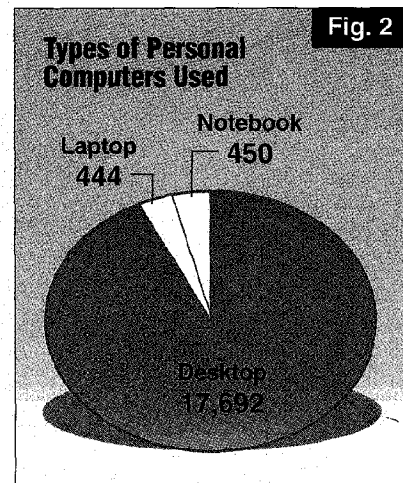
In 1985 these attorney workstations were mostly terminals. In 1992, almost 84 percent of the machines on

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lawyers' desks were microcomputers, not terminals. This means that today most lawyers have a machine that permits independent computing with local storage of electronic work product.

Fig. 1 — Percentage of Attorneys with Workstations on Their Desks ('86 '87 '88 '89 '90 '91 '92)
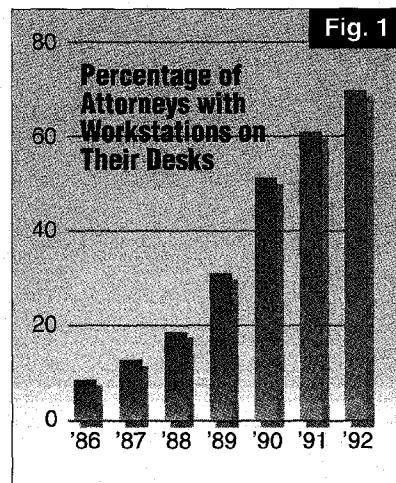
Most of the lawyers' computers were desktops rather than portables: The firms reported 17,692 desktop computers as attorneys' personal workstations. In addition, the firms owned 444 laptop computers and 450 notebook computers. The laptops and notebooks comprised about 5 percent of the total machines used by lawyers. See Figure 2.

The large firms have made a steadily increasing commitment to the use of networks to connect their attorneys' computers. In the 1992 study, 88 percent of lawyers' machines were connected to local area

Fig. 2 — Types of Personal Computers Used: Laptop 444, Notebook 450, Desktop 17,692

networks. In 1991, almost 84 percent of the firms reported using local area networks; in 1990, that number was 56 percent of the firms. See Figure 3.

And these networks deliver LEXIS and WESTLAW to the lawyers' desktops. In 75 percent of the firms responding to the 1992 survey, lawyers were using computer-assisted research from their office desktops.

CD-ROM systems showed a significant presence in large firms for the first time. Forty-five percent of the firms reported using CD-ROM tools. About half of these information systems were installed in lawyers' offices, and 16 percent of the firms reported that their CD-ROM resources were connected to the local area network.

Fig. 3

Growth in Local Area Networks
No. of Firms
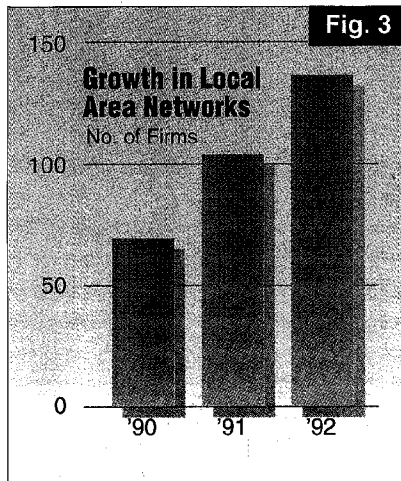
Computers are most frequently used by lawyers for writing and research. In 1992, 87 percent of the attorneys with computers used word processing themselves. WordPerfect captured over 75 percent of the attorney word-processing software. Wang was reported in slightly more than 12 percent of the firms.

In the computer-assisted legal research market, LEXIS was used by more than 97 percent of the responding firms. WESTLAW remained a close second—with 95 percent of the firms using it. All firms that responded to the survey use either one or both of the services.

Since nearly every firm had access to both LEXIS and WESTLAW, the 1992 survey asked the firms to estimate the percent of use, based on total expenditures for computer-assisted research, for LEXIS and WESTLAW.

Overall, LEXIS had about 49 percent of the total expenditures, and WESTLAW about 40 percent. See Figure 4.

Almost every firm is using computers to automate litigation support. For the last three years, more than 90 percent of the firms reported using computers to keep track of documents and transcript testimony. Automated litigation support was once the exclusive province of mainframe computers, outside support vendors and megacases. Today, however, microcomputers owned and operated by the firms themselves are

the equipment of choice for litigation support.

In 1992, as in the previous two years, the most common computer used for litigation support was an in-house microcomputer (used by 79 percent), followed by an in-house minicomputer or mainframe (used by 38 percent). Because these computers are inexpensive and widely

Fig. 4

Computer-Assisted Legal Research Expenditures
Percent of Total Expenditures
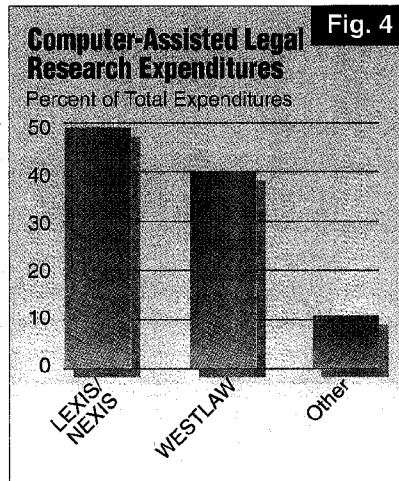
available in the firms, automated litigation support is now being used on smaller cases. See Figure 5.

The survey showed that these litigators are beginning to use graphics software programs for preparing presentations, demonstrative evidence, simulations and statistics for trial work. More than 54 percent said they use graphics software for trials, hearings, depositions and other litigation activities. The firms reported a variety of software programs, including Harvard Graphics, Aldus Pagemaker, and DrawPerfect and Freelance by Lotus.

In the past, lawyers in document-intensive practices, like litigation, tax and estate planning, were more heavily invested in computers. But as computerization has spread, area of practice is much less of a factor.

In the last three years, there has been a steady growth in the use of computers for document assembly and expert systems.

In 1992, 76 percent of the firms reported that attorneys use document assembly systems of varying sophistication. In 1991, that number was 54 percent, and in 1990, 41 percent. See Figure 6.

Some lawyers used simple libraries of "fill-in-the-blank" word processing forms. Other lawyers bought or built more powerful systems that mimic attorney decisions with software containing "if-then" logic and rules that guide the computer in selecting clauses based on

varying client information.

The 1992 Large Firm Survey indicates an extensive increase in the use of personal computers—small, powerful, graphics-capable machines—by the most sophisticated part of the legal profession, the largest law firms. The data may be influenced by the number of reporting firms, as those firms that did not respond may be less committed to computers (151 of the 500 largest law firms, ranked by *Of Counsel*, responded to the questionnaire).

The complete survey results and statistical analysis can be purchased from the Center for Law and Computers at Chicago-Kent College of Law, 565 W. Adams St., Chicago, IL 60611-3691. ■

Fig. 5

Computers Used for Litigation Support
In percent

Fig. 6

Use of Computers to Automate Attorney Practice
Percent of Firms