Expos, Toys and Tales from the Land of Technoweenies

The Tennessee Bar Association sponsored a legal technology seminar at the Midwinter Meeting in Nashville on January 14. It was billed as Lawtech Expo 2000, and was to include exhibitors, a nationally known speaker, etc. In the hope of finding law office nirvana (as well as material for a column), I took the John Ford memorial speedway to the Loews Vanderbilt Plaza where I was totally amazed -- at the lack of exhibitors.   While Lois and Lexis-Nexis were represented, West was nowhere to be found.   There were no companies who specialize in creating web pages, intranets or extranets, and there was only one ISP, Blue Star Communications, which is a DSL (Digital Subscriber Line (seriously fast phone lines)) provider. Memphis' The Data Company was represented and was busy demonstrating Summation, which is a fine litigation support software package. There were no hardware displays by manufacturers or retailers, in spite of a program built around the need for new technology.   In short, there were no gadgets, toys or other electronic essentials that no self respecting technoweenie could do without.   Which was a mistake.   Once the main speaker began to extol the virtues of PDA's (Personal Digital Assistants) such as the Palm Pilot, I'm convinced that an exhibitor could have sold 50 in five minutes, and the place would have looked like a Trekkie convention.   You see, Palm Pilots look like phasers (Speaking of which, Galaxy Quest is a very funny movie, assuming you have ever watched a Star Trek episode or movie.)   Probably could have sold a bunch of notebooks, too.   Dell, where were you.....?

Even though the exhibits were disappointing, the seminar itself -- The Paper <u>Less</u> Office --was instructive and informative, and since most of you reading this were too cheap to pay for the seminar, and since I desperately need filler material, I will summarize the main points.

Number 1: A law office can work more efficiently through the use of technology.   Well duh....
OK, now that we have covered that, let's talk about some new toys (I mean electronic essentials)   that I have learned about.

OK, OK, there's more.

Number 2: By reducing the paper flow within an office, lawyers and staff can work more efficiently if they can quickly find the information they need in order to make decisions.   It seems that we spend an inordinate amount of time looking for a) files; b) documents that go in files; c) the culprit who failed to place the document in the right file so that we can kill that person.   If we want to improve the ability and speed of lawyers to find and act on information within the office, we are going to have to figure out a way to tame the paper flow, which frequently involves multiple people handling, acting upon, and filing (or losing) paper.   If the office has no system for filing and locating paper within the file, the problem is magnified.

According to Ross Kodner,   a disgustingly smart lawyer who understands law offices and technology issues (and seminars and how to make money without having to practice law.....sigh....), the technology is available right now at a low enough price to allow any office to begin to move to a system that will reduce the paper flow (notice I said reduce, not eliminate)

and allow everyone to work more efficiently -- ie., accomplish more in less time (sigh...).

Using off the shelf software, cheap scanners and common sense, Kodner provided a blueprint for changing office paper flow that appears to be manageable, and cost effective.   The first step is to incorporate a document management program that will allow law offices to find electronic documents in one place, regardless of the location of the paper.   His recommended solution is to use Worldox, which has proved a reliable document manager that works with a wide variety of networks and servers. Worldox allows anyone to find and view documents created in the firm, regardless of location or author.   If the document is stored in text, then the files can be searched and located with the program's text search capability. He then recommends a scanner for each work station, and the purchase of a high speed scanner, such as the HP 9100C, to handle volume situations, such as medical records. He likes Visioneer scanners and software for workstations, because of the low price ($50 or less) and the reliability. He justifies scanning all documents on the grounds that network storage solutions are cheap (30 Gigabyte hard drives sell for under $500), such that all of the paper in a file of importance can be scanned,   indexed and stored on a server in graphics form.   By having scanners at each desk, the documents can be entered when the mail is opened, and can be indexed appropriately by the user for later retrieval.

Once scanned, everyone in the office now has access to the information, even if the file is in someone's trunk (don't take this personally, Germany, but you could really use this in your office).   The paper can be retrieved, faxed, and if necessary, converted by an OCR program to a text file.   It can be attached to an email and forwarded to clients or lawyers,   eliminating having to spend time in front of a copier or a fax machine.   Kodner recommends that this solution be used for all files, not just the occasional "monster" file, because it allows the entire office to participate and to develop and maintain the skills to operate the equipment and software without having to relearn it.   Kodner assumes that most law offices are networked, and he believes that this process will work in any environment, regardless of the type of law being practiced.   One of the best examples of a pape rless office   can be found at Gatti, Keltner, Bienvenue & Montesi, which has implemented a system that allows its attorneys and staff to handle a higher case load in less time. Every file is completely scanned and every user has access to all the data in the file. Call Marvin for a tour any day but Friday, as he works all of his files from home on that day, without a paper file in sight.

Kodner's other recommendations include: the ability to fax (and verify the transmission) from any workstation.   He recommends Faxworks, Winfax Pro, FaxPress or RightFax.   He also believes in CD Towers (virtual or multi-bay), so that all users have access to the increasing amounts of information that now comes in CD format.   Most importantly, Kodner emphasizes planning and training.   Purchasing new equipment without figuring out how it will be used is worthless and leads to chaos.   The office must agree on a plan as to how paper is going to be handled and then purchase equipment necessary to implement the plan.   Kodner acknowledges that the process of reducing paper handling is lengthy, but insists that it will result in higher efficiencies and the ability to service clients, inside and outside the office, in a faster, more thorough manner.   That those lawyers who fail to grasp and leverage the technology that enables them to increase productivity will become the Robert Greens of the world -- doomed to a life of having partners poke fun at them on a monthly basis because of their techno phobia. . . .

Shifting topics and speaking of networks, I have installed a wireless network in my home, so that I no longer have to fight my children over who has access to Roadrunner, my cable modem service.   Using wireless ethernet cards manufactured by Proxim, and a nifty program called Sygate, I can now log on to the internet with my notebook from anywhere in the house, even while my son is on the desktop zapping aliens on the internet with an opponent in Australia.   As a result, I am no longer tied to my kitchen corner, nor is there a battle over access.   I am typing this while watching a game in front of the den fireplace, and when finished, I will send the file to the desktop and have it print it without having to copy on to a floppy and reload it onto the desktop.   And I can do so without forcing male heir off the machine.   While Proxim is proven technology, CompUSA has a Diamond wireless notebook/desktop system for $170 and there are others now on the market.   Obviously, this system is perfect for a small office, as it allows connectivity without the expense of running wire, and additional cards can be purchased if more computers are added at minimal expense.

Other notes......the mother of all legal internet sites can be found at www.net-lawyers.org/resources.htm.   The next time you need a search engine, try www.northernlight.com......check out www.tomshardware.com for hardware reviews and sources....I am told that the newest version of Dragon Naturally Speaking (v.4) works better than the version I tested last year (v.3) and is worth the purchase....

Technoweenie Q&A.   In an effort to provide service to the members of the bar, and to fill up a couple of paragraphs, we will answer a technology question monthly that is posed by our faithful readers.   Since we have to start somewhere, the first question comes from my wife.

Q: Why do lawyers pretend that technology makes them more efficient and lowers costs when all they really want is another toy to occupy their time and give them an excuse to spend money for something they don't really need?

A: OK, you win.   We will go to your mother's this weekend and I will take the carpool on Wednesday morning.....