

Popular Tech “Toys” Used in Today’s Savvy Law Firms

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Tool(n): something (as an instrument or apparatus) used in performing an operation or necessary in the practice of a vocation or profession.

Gad·get(n): an often small mechanical or electronic device with a practical use but usually thought of as a novelty.

Toy(n): an object for children or others to play with; plaything.

Ever since man crept out of the primordial ooze and walked upright, he has differentiated himself from the other species by using tools to perform work and make it easier. In fact, some theorize that the use of tools such as spears for hunting allowed man to supplement his vegetarian diet with the higher nutrients found in meat, which resulted in larger and more complex brains, which were then used to develop even more intelligent and efficient tools.

After a few thousand years, work, assisted by tools, became more efficient and leisure time and prosperity increased. Man’s bigger brain needed something to keep it engaged outside of the workaday world and so toys and gadgets evolved as entertainment.

Fast forward to today’s technological society and you are faced with the dizzying results of man’s quest for better and more entertaining tools, gadgets, and toys. As the technology committee of any busy law firm knows, the line between truly productive tools and gadgetry or toys can be a fine one, as lawyers react to increased mobility, demands for instant access to information, and the need to balance work with play to maintain a reasonable quality of life. So which of the following tools, gadgetry or toys will make it past your firm’s purchase approval and which will you have to loosen your own wallet to enjoy?

PDAs and Smart Phones: At the top of the list of personal productivity technology devices is the PDA or SmartPhone, the most popular among lawyers being the Blackberry®, with 80% of the AMLAW 200 law firms as users (based on the AmLaw 2002 listing). Running a close second is the Palm Treo 700p (Palm OS) or Treo W SmartPhone. All three offer all-in-one functionality and operations that includes hands-free cell phone, email access, document access, contacts in digital address books, appointments, and web access. In addition, third party add-ons to both products allow for connection to your firm-based LAN, use of the device as a digital voice recorder, and, with services like MobiTV, will allow you to watch your favorite TV news or sports channels. A PDA can help you find your way around unfamiliar streets and cities using browser-based Google Maps or GPS software like TomTom Navigator. And services like AIRTIME for Professionals ensure that billable time spent talking with clients on the phone and handling emails is not lost but sent automatically as time entries to your billing system. The variety and scope of third- party applications and accessories is mind-boggling and spans the range from tool to toy. From its basic form to the most tricked out units, the PDA/Smart Phone has become a popular, and even essential, business tool.

Laptop PCs: Larger and less “portable” than the PDA, laptop PCs and their smaller cousins, Tablet PCs and UltraMobile Tablets, still have a solid place in the lawyers’ tool kit, especially for more document-intensive work where a larger screen and a keyboard are necessities. Even the most basic unit comes with wireless Internet access and can be easily synchronized with both your PDA and your home office. Nice-to-have gadgets include USB-based Flash drives (one even comes embedded in a wrist watch and we’ve seen another that combines the drive with an MP3 player), WI-FI locators (to easily spot hot-spots), and wireless mice. For the true road warrior looking for a complete office on the road, the latest models of portable

laptop printers with integrated Bluetooth wireless printer adapters make it easy to print documents and pictures from any Bluetooth-enabled laptop and can even be shared with your Bluetooth enabled PDA or SmartPhone.

Digital Cameras: Yes, your Smart Phone has a digital camera and in a pinch, could be used to capture images, however, for the higher resolution that might be necessary to capture writing on a white board or flip chart, today's digital cameras provide excellent quality images in credit card-sized units that slip easily into a pocket or briefcase.

Digital Pens: If you're no typist, and especially if you travel light, with only your PDA on hand, you might want to invest in a digital pen. The latest generation of these devices transform handwritten notes into computer readable files, including text, tables, and drawings, but without the tablet PC or special paper of earlier models. One example is the EPOS Digital Pen which comes in two parts. The first is a combination of a thumb drive and a scanner that clips onto the top of any piece of paper, and the second is a pen that writes in ink but that's designed to have its strokes monitored by the scanner at the top of the page. When you're done writing, you simply plug it into the USB port on your notebook or desktop where the files can be opened as images.

Handheld Scanners: A true mobile professional might consider a hand-held scanner a must-have on the road, especially to capture documents where no electronic copy exists. Handheld scanners, now available in color, allow you to sweep page images to be downloaded into your computer in as little as 4 or 5 seconds a page. Scanning court documents and that smoking gun evidentiary document are just two of its practical uses for lawyers. New versions of this tool (or is it a gadget? You decide.) offer advantages like full page scan (rather than the line-by-line scans of previous models) and disconnected operation (no need to have it connected to your laptop or PC while scanning). Check out a sample at <http://www.planon.com/>.

Other Toys and Gadgets: For the balanced quality of life we all strive for, we cannot forget to mention the gadgets and toys. To entertain you, the Video iPod holds 20,000 songs, 25,000 photos and up to 100 hours of video and lets you download favorite television shows – great for those long plane rides. Also on the plane, pull out your QuietComfort 3 headphones, perfect for when you just want a little peace and quiet. For the road warrior who is also a sports enthusiast, there are literally hundreds of accessories for your PC that will help you hone your golf swing, drive a high performance race car, or get in shape with music and exercise. Last but certainly not least, there's the newest entry into the market, the iPhone, which easily straddles the line from tool to toy by combining all the tool-like features of the PDA/SmartPhone with the iPod and throws in multi-tasking, a Safari browser, and touch controls on a beautiful 3.5 inch widescreen display.

In today's technology-driven world, it turns out that words are not the only tools of the lawyer's trade. And, depending on your imagination, and your firm's, what begins life as a gadget or a toy, can become as essential to practicing that trade as the law books in your library (or the online legal research sites we can't live without these days).

Happy gadgeting!

About the Author

Marcy Fisher, Regional Sales Manager for RainMaker Software, Inc., has more than 25 years of law firm software experience, and has authored articles such as, "Are You Down with Your APP (Average Payables Period)?" and "Harnessing the Information Pipeline" RainMaker provides proven, practical, and progressive Financial Management and Practice Management software, along with Business Intelligence and Microsoft® SharePoint Portal Integration to mid-large sized law firms. Ms. Fisher can be reached at mfisher@rainmakerlegal.com or 716.542.5663.

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