

TECHNOLOGY UPDATE: ATTORNEYS' USE OF COMPUTERS IN THE NATION'S 500 LARGEST LAW FIRMS*

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INTRODUCTION

Chicago-Kent College of Law's Center for Law and Computers has conducted a survey of computer use by attorneys in the nation's 500 largest law firms since 1986. Response rate has been over twenty percent in every year. The survey is conducted annually to track the use of technology by practitioners in large firms. The purpose of the survey is to identify trends and new developments within this influential group of lawyers and to map the educational needs of law students as they enter the workplace. This Essay presents a few of the survey findings.

I. INTERNET: LEGAL RESEARCH AND ONLINE SERVICES

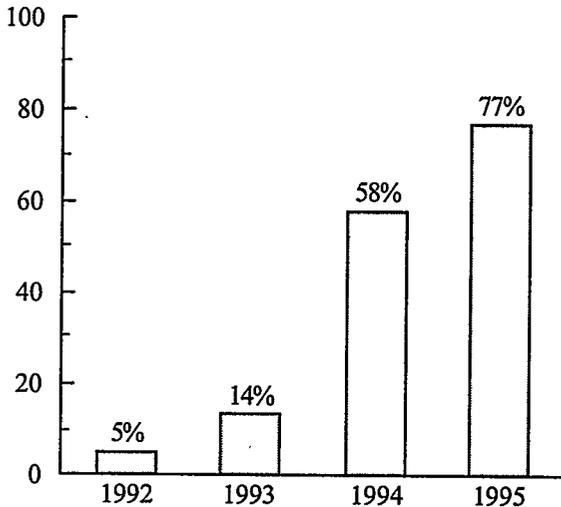
The survey captures data on a number of different applications including whether and how attorneys use computers for legal

* This Essay was drawn from the complete survey results published in the 1996 Chicago-Kent Large Firm Survey. The complete survey and results are available from Chicago-Kent College of Law, Center for Law and Computers, 565 W. Adams, Chicago, IL, 60661.

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research, using online services such as LEXIS/NEXIS¹ and WESTLAW,² as well as CompuServe³ and Dow Jones.⁴ Since 1992, the survey has shown that the attorneys in these large firms also are using the Internet for legal research. In 1992, only five percent of the firms reported having the Internet available for attorneys' legal research. By 1995, that number had grown to seventy-seven percent of the firms, a significant growth in the use of this technology in just three years.

Internet:
Legal Research and Online Services



1. LEXIS is a commercial, full-text information service that began providing subscribers with information in 1973. See LEXIS-NEXIS, *LEXIS-NEXIS Background* (visited Oct. 30, 1996) <<http://www.lexis-nexis.com/lnc/about/background.html>> (on file with *The American University Law Review*). The LEXIS-NEXIS databases currently contain more than 11,000 sources and provide over 953 million documents online. See *id.* More than 779,000 people currently subscribe to LEXIS-NEXIS services. See *id.*

2. WESTLAW is a computer-assisted legal research service containing more than 9000 databases. See West Publishing, *WESTLAW Information* (visited Nov. 5, 1996) <<http://www.westlaw.com/WLAWinfo/wlawhome.htm>> (on file with *The American University Law Review*). WESTLAW was introduced in 1975 as the only computer-assisted legal research service offering synopses, headnotes, and key numbers. See West Publishing, *West Publishing History* (visited Nov. 5, 1996) <<http://www.westlaw.com/htbin/htimage/about.conf#47,240>> (on file with *The American University Law Review*).

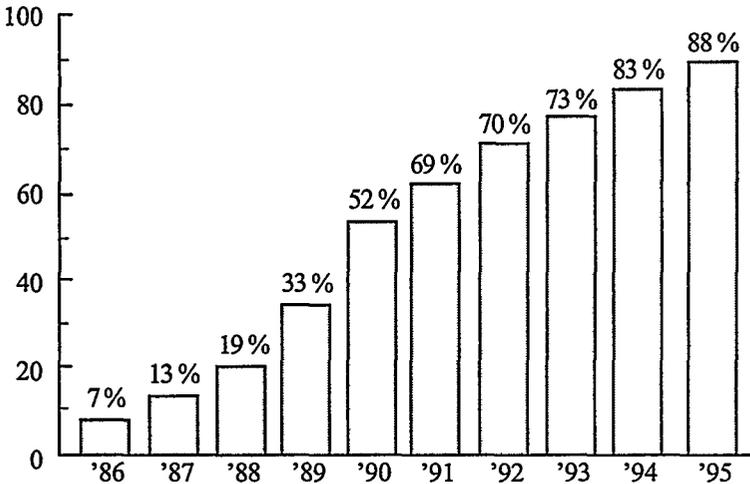
3. CompuServe is one of the world's largest online, network, and Internet service providers. See CompuServe, *Online Services from CompuServe* (visited Nov. 5, 1996) <<http://world.compuserve.com/world/online/index.html>> (on file with *The American University Law Review*).

4. See Dow Jones, *Dow Jones Business Information Services* (visited Jan. 2, 1997) <<http://bis.dowjones.com>> (on file with *The American University Law Review*).

II. PERCENTAGE OF ATTORNEYS WITH WORKSTATIONS ON THEIR DESKS

During the last ten years, attorneys gradually have begun to accept the computer as an integral part of their practice. In 1986, survey respondents indicated that seven percent of the attorneys themselves had a workstation on their desks. For the most part, those "workstations" were terminals.⁵ By 1995, that percentage had grown to eighty-eight percent and the "workstations" now were personal computers that delivered a number of legal and business applications directly to the attorneys' desks through the firm's local area network ("LAN").⁶ Computers now are ubiquitous in the profession.

Percentage of Attorneys
with Workstations on Their Desks



III. LOCAL AREA NETWORKS

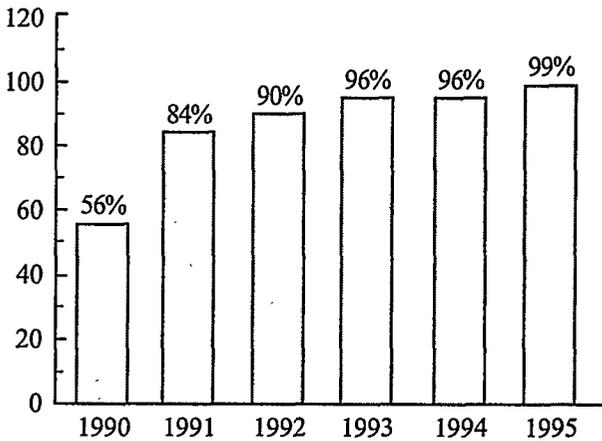
LANs allow firms to deliver a number of applications and services to the legal services delivery team from a centralized location. In addition, LANs provide an environment in which attorneys can share

5. A terminal is a monitor and keyboard device connected to a mainframe computer allowing the user to access and run programs on that mainframe. See Greg R. Notess, *On the Nets: Telnet, the Forgotten Internet Tool*, ONLINE, July 17, 1996, available in 1996 WL 8447855.

6. A Local Area Network ("LAN") connects numerous computers using a variety of software and hardware and operates at a high speed over distances of up to a few thousand meters. See BRENDAN P. KEHOE, *ZEN AND THE ART OF THE INTERNET* 221 (4th ed. 1996).

documents and can communicate electronically with colleagues inside and outside the office and with their clients. It is no surprise that the nation's largest firms have had internal networks for many years. In 1990, the survey respondents reported that fifty-six percent of the firms had a LAN. By 1995, that number had grown to ninety-nine percent. Virtually all of the firms are networked.

Local Area Networks



IV. DOCUMENT ASSEMBLY: DOCUMENT GENERATORS

The firms provide a number of sophisticated applications for attorneys to use in their practices. For example, automated document assembly programs capture attorney expertise and provide a vehicle for attorneys to reuse that expertise electronically.⁷ Some firms use simple word processing features, such as merge⁸ and macro⁹ features, to automate their practices. An increasing number of firms use sophisticated automated document assembly programs to instruct the computer to choose appropriate text for a specific client, to retain answers for use with the same client at a later time, and to build

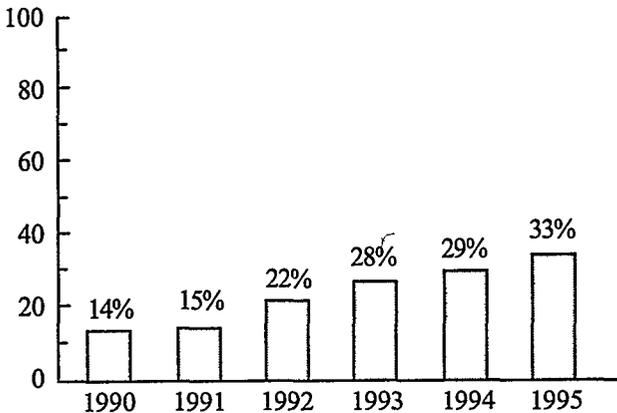
7. A number of document assembly programs are available to lawyers including HotDocs, Expertext, and FastDraft. The ABA Legal Technology Resource Center maintains information on a wide range of law-related technology products, including document assembly programs.

8. A merge feature allows a user to write a form document and to have the computer quickly fill in the blanks using information from a database. See ALAN SIMPSON, *MASTERING WORDPERFECT 6.1 FOR WINDOWS 680* (1995).

9. A macro feature allows a user to execute repetitive functions quickly, such as assigning commonly used words or phrases or performing multiple menu selections. See ALAN SIMPSON, *MASTERING WORDPERFECT 5.1*, at 432 (1990).

client databases for gathering and reporting on client information. Some of these sophisticated document assembly programs select documents and clauses with programmed logic that resembles artificial intelligence. In 1990, only about fourteen percent of the firms reported using these sophisticated document generators. By 1995, that number had grown to thirty-three percent, a significant increase in the use of these complex packages.

Document Assembly:
Document Generators



V. ONLINE SERVICES

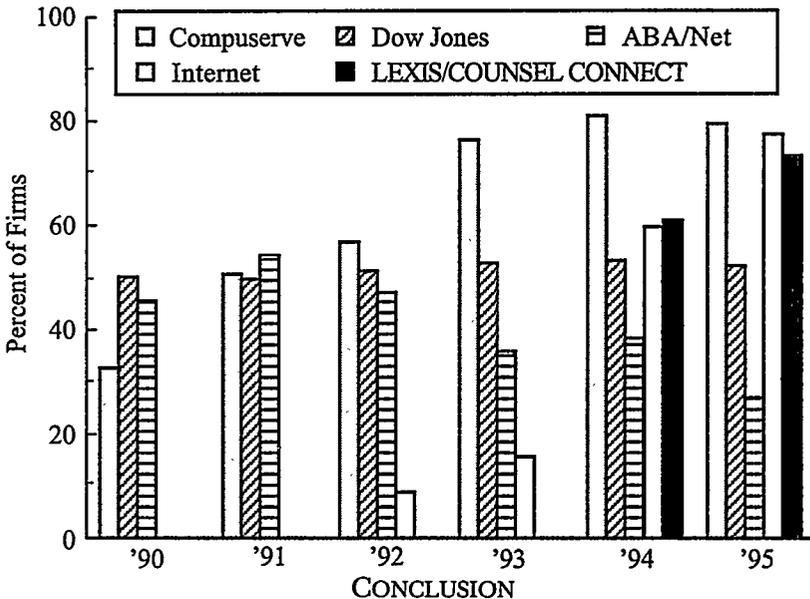
For some time, the large firms have reported providing a number of online services for their attorneys' use in legal research. These services have included commercial services such as CompuServe¹⁰ and Dow Jones.¹¹ In recent years, though, the survey shows a significant increase in the use of private communications services such

10. See CompuServe, *supra* note 3.

11. See Dow Jones, *supra* note 4.

as Counsel Connect, an exclusive attorneys-only service¹² used for electronic communications, marketing, and online continuing legal education. In 1992, only a handful of firms were using Counsel Connect. By 1995, that number was almost eighty percent. The significant investment in a private service such as Counsel Connect is evidence of the importance of these services in the profession.

Online Services



In conclusion, attorneys and law firms are using computers and advanced electronic communications throughout the profession; computer use is ubiquitous. In the coming years, expect to see advances in how attorneys use technology to redefine law practice. The presence and integration of high-level technology will open opportunities for reaching clients and for making the practice of law more efficient.

12. "Counsel Connect is the largest online service exclusively for lawyers." Counsel Connect, *Inside Counsel Connect* (visited July 28, 1996) <<http://www.counsel.com/inside/about.html>> (on file with *The American University Law Review*). Counsel Connect's features include a searchable Internet directory of all Counsel Connect members, more than 200 practice-specific discussion groups, monthly online seminars, and e-mail. See *id.*