

TIME TO NETWORK YOUR LAW OFFICE?

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Introduction

To answer the question - is it time to network your law office? – simply consider : Do you and your associates work together on the same cases or projects? Do your staff and assistants exchange floppies to work on the same documents? Do you transfer data through floppies in order to print from the designated office printer? Does each of your lawyers have their own 56k dial-up access to the Internet? If your answer to any of these questions is yes, then it is clearly time to network your office. Due to the collaborative and resource-intensive nature of legal work, networking your law office is often the first crucial step towards greater productivity and more efficient document management .

With the rapid development in PC and Internet technology, networking is no longer an option for the larger law firms only. Today, solos and smaller 2-3 person law firms who want immediate access to shared files and research as well as shared access to the Internet through faster broadband cables are finding that networking is the best solution for sharing these resources. The initial cost of setting up the network is easily recovered over time as printers, scanners and a single broadband Internet access can now be shared amongst several users.

In terms of costs and implementation, there are two ways to network your law office –

PEER-TO-PEER NETWORK

For solos and small practices with 10 or fewer computers, this is the simpler and cheaper option as you do not need to purchase or maintain a central “server”.

The principle elements of a peer-to-peer network are –

1. Network Interface – this is a device installed in each PC that enables the PCs to communicate with one another. They come in a range of formats (PCI cards, USB or parallel port devices) but each should be equipped to work in 10 and 100- megabit networks.
2. Hub or Switch – this is an “exchange” through which all the network cables are routed to their final destination. The hub or switch must possess enough ports to support the number of PCs or devices (eg, printers or scanners) that will be routed through it. A “hub” shares a single bandwidth among its different users while a “switch” is dedicated to traffic on one specific channel. For this reason, switches work better but costs more.
3. Cable – finally, the glue for your network is the cable that connects each PC to the hub or switch.

CLIENT / SERVER NETWORK

Implementing a central server network involves a larger investment in terms of cost and maintenance. In addition to the network interface cards, hub or switch and cables, you must also install a server to manage and direct data traffic between the PCs and devices that are part of the network.

The cost and size of the server depends on the number of users (in client-server network terminology, these are the "clients") and the size of the software applications that is being used. At entry level, an effective server would require a high-speed processor, 256MB RAM and at least 20GB of expandable storage space.

The principle advantages of a client-server network over a peer-to-peer network is –

1. Sharing / Restricted Access – shared data is stored in one central depository (the "S-Drive" or shared drive) to enable quick and easy retrieval by lawyers and staff on their individual desktops. Sensitive or confidential data in the shared drive can be password protected so that only authorised persons have access to this data.
2. Data Loss – important or sensitive data is stored in the server to prevent accidental data loss from individual computers. Regular backups of the important shared data can now be more easily implemented since it is sitting in one place. It is also good practice to automate regular backups of data in the Sdrive.
3. Intranet email / communication – an email application can be installed on a server to enable internal email (and file attachments) to be sent and received within the office network without relying on the Internet.
4. Scalability – to accommodate future expansion of your law practice, a client server network allows you to "scale up" by adding more PCs, printers, applications and storage space to the existing network without having to incur the cost of re-designing your IT infrastructure.
5. Software Applications – most commercial software applications (for example, case management, litigation support and document management software) are built for server networks and priced accordingly.

The extraordinary development of IT technology can help you position yourself to competitive advantage in the legal services market. Investing in them now could have dramatic payoff in the future. To reap these benefits, the best advice we can give you is to implement an IT infrastructure ready to adopt new applications.

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