

Synopsis:

In this article, attorney and legal writer Jeffrey S. Lisson discusses the economics of technology, and why it's often cheaper for attorneys to hire professionals than to try to do it on their own.

Short bio:

Jeffrey S. Lisson is the civil litigator in the three-lawyer firm of Carter, Boyd & Lisson, P.C., in San Angelo, Texas. He has written extensively for TechnoLawyer, and has had many articles on legal technology published nationally in various journals and periodicals. He serves on the council of the Computer & Technology Section of the State Bar of Texas.

### **THE FALSE ECONOMY OF DIY TECHNOLOGY**

Lawyers as a group are notoriously cheap. We recommend our clients make business decisions that may cost tens of thousands of dollars, but we won't invest a few hundred dollars in technology to improve our practices and our lives.

How many times have you told a client that if they'd paid for a \$200 consultation, they could have avoided a \$5,000 retainer on a lawsuit? We do the equivalent with technology.

Rather than pay a consultant to help us select, install, and train us and our staffs, we either: 1) do without; 2) spend hours trying to do it ourselves; or 3) regret spending the money because we never use that new, shrinkwrapped software or scanner.

Consider this article my "Pay me now or pay me more later" speech on technology.

Hey, I love to tinker as much as the next guy. Whether it's tools, cars, or computers, I like getting under the hood. But that's what I do for fun.

When I'm in the office, I want to work. My goal *in* the office usually is to get *out* of the office. (Being a lawyer is what I do, not what I am.)

Technology helps me get my work done in less time, and get home to my wife and kids sooner. Or, in the same amount of time, I can get more work done, and earn more money.

Computerized case management systems, document assembly, and knowledge management software save attorney time and money and quickly pay for themselves. For example: If you bill \$150 per hour, but can save just 144 seconds per day by using a computerized case management system, a \$1,500 investment will pay for itself in one year (144 seconds x 5 days per week x 50 work weeks per year = 10 hours). (For more information on the benefits of computerized case management, see my article on [www.lissonlaw.com](http://www.lissonlaw.com).)

After show them the math, many lawyers see how this makes economic sense. But convincing them to take the next step – hiring a pro to install and administer a computer network, or to train lawyers and staff on how to use systems and software – is a bit more difficult.

When I was a solo, I remember spending the better part of a Sunday afternoon and evening running Cat 5 cable and trying get a network running under Windows 98. At my

then-billing rate of \$150 per hour, setting up that network cost me more than \$900. A pro could have done it in two hours, at a cost to me of less than \$300, cable included.

I also investigated and bought my own software. I installed it, updated it, and trained my staff on it. That means I took \$150 per hour time to learn the software and teach it to my employees. I also was, in effect, spending \$150 per hour to install software and updates.

I'm not advocating that attorneys abandon their role in evaluating software. Lawyers must be involved in the decision on which major pieces of software to use. But that doesn't mean we should be the ones sitting at a desk inserting CDs, entering license codes, and rebooting computers.

Even though I tried to look at whether my time was well spent as a solo, it wasn't until I moved back to West Texas and joined my current firm that I realized how I was wasting time and money.

In my current firm of three lawyers and five staff, we have a guy from the local university who does all of our network and software administration. He comes in for an hour or so every weekend, and we pay him \$35 per hour. Good money for him; a bargain for us.

For that \$35/hour rate, our tech guy he makes sure our network stays up; does diagnostics on hard drives; checks for updates on all of our software; installs updates and upgrades that come in the mail; and runs spyware checks on the individual computers. He also installed our VPN (virtual private network) device for remote access to our network. When we buy a new computer, he installs all the software and configures the computer for us.

Could I do all this myself for the firm? Sure. But we pay this guy about \$2,000 per year. That's the equivalent of 10 hours of my time, at my current billing rate. So for the same money, we get more than quadruple the time from a guy who knows what he's doing. To me, that's a bargain!

I still investigate software that we want to add to our arsenal. For example, we recently bought Adobe Acrobat 7.0 ([www.adobe.com](http://www.adobe.com)) after I approved the purchase. But I let our techie install it. Even if it takes just five minutes per installation, that would be 40 minutes of my time to do the installation. We paid our techie less than \$30; my time would have run about \$130.

The false economy of doing it yourself doesn't stop there. When I was solo, I spent about a day to get Amicus Attorney ([www.amicusattorney.com](http://www.amicusattorney.com)), HotDocs ([www.hotdocs.com](http://www.hotdocs.com)), and Corel WordPerfect ([www.corel.com](http://www.corel.com)) to work together. I then spent another day training my staff on how to use the software. Cost in my time at prior billing rates: \$2,400.

For less than half that amount, I could have hired a pro to come from a nearby large city to install, link, and train me and my staff on use of the software. The rest of the time, I could have been working and billing. And, the professional trainer would have given us documentation on using the linked programs, tips, and been available for phone or e-mail questions and consultations.

And I haven't even mentioned the improved service to the client. We can lower our costs and deliver legal work quicker, because we're spending less time on computer stuff.

The moral of this story? Evaluate the costs of hiring a pro versus not hiring a pro. Don't give in to the false economy of DIY technology. Consultants charge money, but they're usually worth every penny.

Where do you find a good consultant? The best place is from someone else who uses the same software or network. Check locally, or on software message boards. Check company web site for certified consultants.

Try to find a techie to administer your network at a local university or community college. They'll usually work cheap, though they may have to do a lot of work at nights or on weekends. That's usually okay, as the office staff won't be around.

If you enjoy the "under the hood" sort of thing, go ahead. But as for me, I'd rather serve my clients, or spend more time with my kids.