

Opinion: Days of digitized law practices are here to stay



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The pandemic has only accelerated the changes. While attorneys in the past could rely on staff to deal with the technology, it is almost impossible today for an attorney to practice without a fairly high degree of technological know-how.

For many years, attorneys dictated their correspondence and sent it through the mail. Today, I am aware of few attorneys that still dictate letters. Most are proficient at typing and compose their own communications and send them through email. No need to send documents by overnight courier and wait for them to return. The speed of practicing law has improved as a result.

Most legal materials are now available online. Large law libraries with vast volumes of case books are a thing of the past. The only firms that have them are those that collected them prior to the digital age and cannot bring themselves to dispose of them. My law office does not contain even one such tome. State statutes are also available online. I practice in Missouri, Arkansas and Florida and do not have a physical copy of any of the statutes.

Even the in-person practice of law is changing. Except for new clients who want to come into the office, almost all legal services are now provided electronically. Email, phone and video conferencing have eliminated the need for clients to drive to their attorneys' offices. During the lockdown, almost all

client consultations were handled remotely, through phone, email or a video conference call. Many clients, especially those residing out of state, or new clients over the past two years, have never been to my office or met me in person.

For clients who have the ability to print, sign and scan documents, filing a lawsuit or opening a probate estate may be done digitally. The documents are prepared for the client's signature and filed online with the Missouri state courts' automated case management system. Filing fees also are paid online, by credit card or electronic check. In fact, with few exceptions such as original wills, an attorney cannot even file a physical document with the Missouri courts.

The courts also have adapted to online platforms for entire jury trials and many routine hearings. While jury trials are once again taking place in Greene County and surrounding counties, many hearings are continuing to take place through platforms such as Webex or Skype. Such hearings are quick, efficient for the court and serve the purpose needed.

Although some of the COVID-19 restrictions are being loosened, the practice of law is not likely to return to the pre-pandemic, in-person practice it was before. The flexibility, speed and ease of the digital practice of law is here to stay.

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