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COMPUTER USE BY ONE PRACTITIONER: AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBIN MEADOW

Interviewed by Chantal Eldridge

Robin Meadow is a twelve-year partner in the litigation department at Loeb and Loeb in Los Angeles. He served as managing partner of the department for five years and specializes in business litigation and appellate practice. Mr. Meadow graduated from Boalt Hall in 1971 and has been an active participant in the bar.¹

This interview was formulated as a result of personal observation of Mr. Meadows' extensive computer reliance and was inspired by the Journal's recognition of attorneys' general aversion to computers and high technology use. This is not an attempt to encourage the use of high technology in every law office but only a recognition of its usefulness in certain environments. For further recognition of the role high technology plays in the legal community, see Freeman, *Riding the Second Wave*, 8 CALIF. LAW. 65 (1988).

Q: How did you first become acquainted with computers?

A: I got my first computer (one of the early Atari models) in 1982. I bought it mainly out of curiosity.

Q: Where did you get your training that enables you to use computers successfully?

A: I am self-taught. I learned the rudiments of BASIC programming with the Atari and wrote a few simple games and other programs. Since getting an IBM I have experimented with many different kinds of software, and I read several computer publications. In addition, I turn to various dial-up services (such as CompuServe) when I am having trouble doing something.

Q: How did you first come to integrate your computer skills with your legal practice?

A: I first used a computer in litigation in the mid-1970's to track claims in a class action, using a client's mainframe. A few years later I used the firm's accounting minicomputer in a similar role.

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1. See Meadow, *Sanctions for Frivolous Appeals*, 8 L.A. LAW. 48 (1985); Meadow, *My Turn*, 9 L.A. LAW. 9 (1986).

When I got my first personal computer I was managing the firm's litigation department, and I wrote a simple program to help me keep track of the litigators' workload. I quickly learned that a spreadsheet program would do a better job, and when I got an IBM computer I started using Lotus 1-2-3. I then began using 1-2-3 whenever I had a project that involved any kind of work with numbers. For instance, I was handling a construction case during that period that involved a lot of technical work in the area of wind forces, and I developed a spreadsheet to help me analyze the variables my opponent's expert was using.

Q: What problems did you encounter with the integration, i.e., technical problems, peer pressure or disdain, choosing software or expert legal systems?

A: Until fairly recently I was the only lawyer in the firm using a computer. I had to learn everything myself, and I could not delegate computer work to anyone. If I had an idea for a computer project, I pretty much had to do it myself.

Q: Do you now have your own software system specifically designed for your practice, or did you adjust your own needs to a commercial program?

A: Neither the firm nor I have any custom-designed PC software. Commercially available programs do most of what we have needed so far.

Q: How extensive is your reliance on computers, i.e., do you have several programs for varying functions, how do you input the necessary information, etc.?

A: I now use computers (either myself or via paralegals) for almost every aspect of my practice. I use an outlining program as a repository for information and ideas in my various cases. While I do not usually use word processing programs for generating first drafts, I do a lot of revision work on the computer. I frequently use spreadsheets for analytical work and to generate number-intensive documents. I also use my computer to access Lexis and Westlaw.

Q: What kind of equipment do you have, i.e., hardware, software programs, special features, etc.?

A: I have computers at home and at the office. I also use a portable the firm acquired for a couple of large cases. The programs I use most are GrandView, Lotus 1-2-3, ZyIndex, DisplayWrite 4, Wordperfect, R:Base, MemoryMate, Lexis, and Westlaw.

Q: You are one of the few partners in the legal field who re-

lies on computers so extensively. How did that affect your decision to integrate your office in the beginning?

A: It had no impact; I welcomed the opportunity to experiment, even if I was on my own.

Q: How did the other attorneys react? Have those attitudes changed over the years?

A: Reactions have ranged from interest through amusement to hostility. Lawyers who have actually used computers to solve specific problems tend continue using them, even if they are not interested in getting their own computers. They often encourage other lawyers to begin using computers.

Q: Do you think that your reliance on computers has benefited your practice? How about the firm's practice?

A: Computers have made me significantly more efficient than I used to be, and they have enabled me to do things that I could not otherwise do. For example, I am now handling a lengthy arbitration that has so far generated well over 100 volumes of deposition and hearing transcripts. ZyIndex allows me to find testimony that I could probably never find using a conventional summary. In fact, for the most part I have had no need to use summaries, and as a result the client has probably saved many thousands of dollars. Transcript-indexing programs are now standard in our larger cases, and every lawyer who uses them quickly finds them indispensable.

Although I do not often use a computer for basic document generation, in those situations where I do — fine-tuning the language in a brief, for instance, or drafting some other document where the language is particularly important — I believe that the efficiency and quality of my work has increased substantially. I avoid the time and effort of making repeated handwritten revisions, and I can rework the language as much as I want to get it just right. I can also work at home or at odd hours when secretarial help may be difficult to obtain.

Q: How many more billables would you estimate you gain from your use of computers?

A: Computers do not necessarily increase lawyers' chargeable hours. In the right circumstances, they allow lawyers to handle more work in the same amount of time. Most important, they can improve the quality of the lawyer's work, if nothing else by making resources immediately available to them.

Q: Do you feel that your client benefits from the advantages you gain by using computers? If so, in what ways?

A: Yes, because the work takes less time (and therefore costs

less) and I have the ability to do things for the client that I might not otherwise be able to do.

Q: Is your computer system set up in your home so as to have access to your working files at all times?

A: While I could transfer files by modem, I find that the easiest method is to take floppies home. Otherwise, both computers have to be running and ready for access, and they become a security risk.

Q: Do you think that your use of computers had increased your free time, i.e., more time with your family, increased workload to compensate for your efficiency?

A: I can do more work at home, but otherwise I have not really gained much free time.

Q: What are your expectations for the future with regard to the use of computers in the field of law?

A: I expect to see firms expand their use of computers in areas where computers are already being used. Each year the incoming lawyers are much more familiar with computers than their predecessors, and many of them already own computers. As more lawyers cross the intimidation barrier that sometimes prevents older lawyers from using computers, I expect computers to become commonplace in most firms.

Q: What advantages/disadvantages do you see?

A: I see no disadvantages in expanded use of computers, but there are some risks that any firm needs to avoid. New users are sometimes tempted to use their computers for everything, even though many tasks are better done manually. Computers should be used to eliminate drudgery and allow lawyers to use their time more creatively. Overusing them has the opposite effect. In addition, of course, there are always special security risks and the risk of losing information through malfunctions.

Q: How do you deal with computer specific problems that arise, i.e., lost files, misplaced disks, power surges, natural disasters?

A: I follow regular backup routines, as every computer user must do.

Q: Do you think that anyone could adapt to your system of practice?

A: Everyone's system of practice is unique, and using computers only emphasizes lawyers' different styles. Aside from searching transcript databases, I do very little with computers that I did not do manually before I had a computer. There really isn't any

one best way of using computers, and I would not necessarily expect anyone to imitate my approach to things.

Q: What skills or special knowledge would it require, and how would you suggest getting that knowledge?

A: Learning to use computers effectively does not require special knowledge, but it does require a fair amount of learning time. Good typing skills are essential, since otherwise almost any work is a time-consuming chore. A novice user has to learn the basics of computer operation as well as how to use the specific programs he or she wants to run. Classes are useful for people who are intimidated by the process.

Q: Would you recommend computer integration to other practicing attorneys?

A: Yes, assuming that the integration is consistent with the lawyer's personal style.

Q: Apart from yourself, do you consider Loeb and Loeb a "high-tech" legal office? If so, why?

A: Loeb and Loeb probably represents the middle of the road. The firm was an early user of computer technology for word processing, accounting and time-keeping, but we have been slower to computerize our practice areas. Our conservatism is not unusual; many firms recognize that in an environment of rapidly changing technology it is risky to be on the leading edge.

Q: Has Loeb and Loeb's reliance on high technology increased in recent years, and if so, could you give some examples?

A: We have mainly expanded our litigation support. We use transcript databases for most large cases and we regularly use database and spreadsheet programs. Transactional lawyers are beginning to carry computers with them to speed the process of document generation.

Q: Do you think that Loeb and Loeb could successfully compete with other firms if it refused to expand its practice to include the benefits of high technology?

A: No firm can compete if it ignores technology.

