

## **Information Technology**

### **How can a computer help?**

Computers have become an essential tool for the efficient running of a law firm. Over the past few years the cost of equipment has dropped to an acceptable level so allowing many who were previously unable or unwilling to purchase systems to share in the benefits of ever improving legal software.

Many firms will, in the first instance, acquire a computer system for the primary purpose of attending to their cash accounting but the benefits of other easy to use software should also be explored.

COMPUTER STRATEGY: A computer system is too powerful a tool to serve no other purpose but word processing and cash accounting, even though the latter was the first reason for its acquisition. Other staff functions which would benefit from computerisation include: Time Recording, Word Processing, Debt Collection, Estate Agency and so on. Partners and Fee earners are also beginning to use computers to assist with such work as conveyancing support, litigation support and many other support packages are now readily available.

### **Some do's and don'ts, pitfalls to avoid**

There are no short cuts to the selection of effective computer systems. The only sure approach is to match the firm's detailed requirements against the available solutions.

- (i) Look at several systems before you buy. Ask for a written proposal in response to your written specification of requirements. Ensure that unit prices for all items of hardware, software, support costs etc are itemised.
- (ii) Ask for a list of users and contact them. Ideally, visit some.
- (iii) When possible, buy hardware and software which conform to computer industry standards.
- (iv) Read the supplier's purchase contract carefully. Make sure it is not solely in the supplier's favour.
- (v) Consider whether your firm is willing to be tied to a single supplier.
- (vi) Check the financial viability of any proposed supplier.
- (vii) After the system is installed, use passwords to prevent unauthorised access to sensitive parts of the software and information. Change passwords from time to time.
- (viii) Purchase of a computer system marks the start of a long term relationship with the supplier's support personnel. Assess their quality and their ability to work with you.
- (ix) Contact the Law Society of Scotland for a list of accredited suppliers.

To comply with the Solicitors Accounts Rules and for management purposes, cash accounting software should provide at least the following functions:

- Client ledger information;
- Firm ledger information;
- Posting procedures;
- Day Book or Audit Trail;
- Client Trial Balance;
- Amounts over £500 by date;
- Fees and outlays outstanding;
- Fees analysis by type of work;
- Client enquiry procedures;
- Client ledger print-outs;
- Clients credit control figure;
- Client Other Funds records;
- Management Reporting;
- Compliance, Solicitors Accounts Rules;
- Security backup;
- Password protection.

Because a solicitor acts like a bank, looking after clients' money, it must not be possible to delete an account without first obtaining a full print-out of every transaction. It is also important to ensure that the system allows plenty of space for narrative within the posting routine. Adequate description of the posting transaction is necessary for compliance with the Rules.

The above list is not exhaustive, but gives you some helpful indicators when it comes to buying your computer equipment.

### **Implementation**

The success of any computer depends at least as much on the care and attention devoted to its implementation as on the quality of the system itself. Select the person responsible for the system carefully and allocate sufficient resources.

Pay particular attention to: Planning, to ensure that the system achieves defined business goals;

Training, not just of the operators but all who will be affected by the system;

Project Management, to co-ordinate the many activities involved.

### **The Internet**

Over the past few years the Internet has emerged as perhaps one of the most important technical developments since the invention of the telephone. The growth of the Internet over the past two or three years has been immense and the benefits available to firms, institutions and clients are only now being recognised. To connect to the

Internet you just need a computer with the appropriate software, a modem and a telephone socket.

The growth of e-commerce and e-mail is explosive - one has only to look at a newspaper to recognise that individuals, institutions and corporate bodies are now advertising and transacting on the World Wide Web (www). The Internet user can browse through thousands of sites offering information on everything under the sun.

E-mail is the system of communication with others over a network which may be by way of a dedicated modem, an internal (intranet) network or externally over the Internet.

E-commerce is the facility whereby goods and services can be purchased over the Internet. Payment for such goods or services being made (currently) by way of credit card.

The public have not been slow to take up this new technology and firms should, if they have not already done so, take advice and develop skills in this rapidly growing form of communication either through developing Web sites for their own use or establishing e-mail connections through the Internet to allow better communication with clients, fellow agents and institutions.