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Abstract: As users and purveyors of knowledge, lawyers have been reluctant to use information technology. The widespread use of technology in the UK legal profession has been restricted to limited applications, and the scope for potential use still remains vast. The accepted and potential uses are examined in the context of bringing in new business, handling clients' affairs, and managing the law firm. After examining the sources of resistance to the use of technology, and the current pressure for change, the training implications of further and better use of technology are discussed.

Lawyers as Knowledge Workers

The legal profession has a lower proportion of knowledge workers as a total of all staff than other comparable commercial professions. This may mean that it is placing too much reliance on recruiting staff for administrative and support purposes, or it may imply too little use of information technology by lawyers both in the administration and support of their business or in the process of delivering legal services to clients.

Potential Greater than Reality

In this scenario, therefore, there is much greater scope for lawyers to introduce technology to improve their administrative and support functions, and to help them as lawyers in serving their clients.

Accepted Uses of Technology

Most law firms now use technology for time-recording and accounting systems, and for word-processing. A variety of suppliers, many of whom have no experience of working in a legal environment, means that there is a diversity of systems with little standardisation.

Potential Uses

The following represent further ways in which many law firms can benefit from technology, and a few enlightened firms have already taken steps to do so.

a. Bringing in business:

- client database and analysis
- marketing
- conflict-checking

b. Handling clients' affairs

- document assembly
- computer-assisted drafting
- research and know-how systems
- indexes
- on-line databases
- expert systems
- litigation, etc. support systems
- electronic distribution of information

c. Management:

- financial management and analysis
- electronic mail
- diaries
- storage and archiving
- file and deeds management
- personnel systems
- space planning

Sources of Resistance

The resistance of the legal profession to the enlightened technology is the result of a combination of factors. The most important are:

- lack of awareness
- unfortunate experiences
- unwillingness to invest
- self-deluding billing practices

Pressure for Change

As time goes by, the pressure on lawyers to change and to embrace modern information technology increases. Currently, the pressure for change arises from:

- clients
- enlightened competitors
- recruits

Only rarely does the real drive arise from inside a law firm - except as a response to these outside forces.

Training

Even those firms who have introduced often substantial technology into their practices have failed to introduce the relevant or a sufficient amount of training to make these systems truly efficient and successful. The training required falls into the following categories:

- awareness training
- training those who choose and implement the technology
- training those who use the technology

Very few firms are using the technology itself as part of their training procedures (e.g. interactive video, tailored training disks and on-line help screens).