

Tech Counsel: Toting a Tablet

By Lincoln Miller

Practicing in a legal community that is 15 miles as the crow flies from downtown Seattle (but sometimes 15 years behind in technology) I can't help but smile when downtown lawyers ask me how I was able to e-mail them a handwritten note, a snipped web page with inked comments, or an attached cover letter signed in blue ink. Tablet PCs, when used to their potential, create a "wow" factor that clients love, judges appreciate, and opposing counsel envy.



Last May, I purchased a tablet computer from TabletLawyer (www.TabletLawyer.com) for about \$3,700. I picked Motion Computing Inc.'s model LE1600 (www.motioncomputing.com). TabletLawyer is a Poulsbo, Wash.-based tablet computer sales and consulting firm, founded by solo attorney James Province.

My tablet computer is now my primary computer in my law practice, which is oriented towards serving small business owners with their real estate and estate planning needs. I'm currently with Sherrard McGonagle Bohannon & Miller, based in Poulsbo, but I am in the process of transitioning to a solo practice.

I purchased the largest memory and longest-lasting batteries I could get, along with a docking station. The cost, to my surprise, was only about \$300 more than a traditional laptop with similar specifications. However, the real selling point was the complimentary training (from a lawyer, no less) that I received by purchasing my system through TabletLawyer, combined with the competitive pricing for the computer. With about two hours of training, I quickly overcame the learning curve of using a tablet computer.

Tablets come in "slate" or convertible models. The slate version has a monitor-style screen that you can literally write on. The convertible is a laptop with a swiveling monitor that you can lay flat over the keyboard — and write on. The convertible is heavier, so I opted for the slate because I didn't need the permanently affixed keyboard that I would use only occasionally.

While I love the tablet's pen for its ease in clicking icons and scrolling pages, I enjoy it more for its primary purpose — writing. Others downplay this feature because they type faster than they write (as do I). But typing has its limitations and handicaps that are easily hurdled by the versatility of a tablet.

For example:

- When a recently widowed client e-mailed me while I was on vacation and asked if I would serve as executor of his \$15 million estate, a quick handwritten e-mail response was the perfect response to such a personal request.
- Using the tablet with Microsoft Corp.'s OneNote software, I paste my briefing, sworn declarations and case law as attachments into the outline of my argument for motion practice.
- During argument, I can move between my documents and notes and take notes without distracting the judge, court reporter or opposing counsel.
- Using a laptop in client meetings or in court creates a physical barrier between attorney and client/judge. With the tablet, there's no monitor in the way and the interaction with the client or judge is no different than having a yellow pad in hand.

Respond Favorably

My clients respond favorably to the tablet in ways they never would to a traditional laptop. They appreciate that their attorney is ahead of the technology curve and recognize the extra value.

It's not uncommon to e-mail a client a handwritten "to do" list during a client conference, so the client doesn't have to worry about taking notes as we discuss matters. While clients enjoy seeing the tablet, they also appreciate the behind-the-scenes efficiency it produces. Long ago,

I decided not to screen incoming calls. In my pre-tablet days, that practice left me disorganized. Often I couldn't immediately locate the file for the matter my client wished to discuss. On occasion, after I took notes, the notes would not get placed immediately into the client file (assuming they made it there).

Now, when I receive calls I can immediately pull up my notes (whether handwritten or typed) because they're stored in OneNote. The ability to navigate from page to page is quick and simple. By the time I've exchanged pleasantries with my client, my notes are on the monitor before me. My clients aren't waiting for me to locate the physical file or reminding me about what we just discussed a week ago.

More important is the ability to store the notes electronically. With OneNote, you don't save your notes. Instead they're automatically stored, leaving you with the option to file them electronically when you're ready to do so. You can even shut down your computer while notes have not been moved to a client file without risk of losing them.

Opportunities to use the tablet's unique features present themselves in a variety of ways. Recently, I took a PDF of a survey and wrote on it with different colors to identify the potential drainage routes and easements that the city and adjacent owners had discussed. After highlighting the relevant properties with different colors and creating a legend to tie everything together, I e-mailed the marked up survey to the client, who could then better understand the situation immediately.

Tablets have come a long way, but there is room for improvement. I'm waiting for the day when a tablet pen will have the ability to scan. Until then, I'll continue to enjoy the "How did you do that?!" remarks that come when I use my tablet.

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