

Business & Careers

Technology changes don't need to be expensive



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Hi-Tech

Automobile owners and business computer users face similar decisions and anxieties. They each rely on complex machines, rarely understand the inner workings of these machines and they often don't know how to cost-effectively acquire and maintain them.

This is the first of two-part series to offer basic advice to law firms on making cost-effective technology decisions. Here's part one — acquiring a new computer. Use these criteria to choose the model for you.

Physical features

If possible, try using the models you're considering. As you focus on your work,

you'll get a feel for the keyboard, pointing device, screen and the overall computing experience.

While it's easy to switch these components for desktop models, you're stuck with the components on a notebook. Unless you like to lug such components while working on the go, it's best to make sure a notebook provides an agreeable working environment before you buy it.

At a minimum, computers must adequately handle the software that firms rely on every day. Using as a benchmark the hardware requirements recommended by software developers — “recommended,” not “minimum” — ought to help firms develop realistic computing budgets. Software developers usually publish hardware requirements in their documentation and on their websites.

Refresh cycles: guidelines, not rules

Refresh cycles are like budgets — numbers that may or may not prove accurate in the future. For instance, individual computers may suffer issues not covered by the

manufacturer's warranty.

Here's another scenario: The day before being interviewed for this article, Andrew Feldstein placed an order for seven notebooks. His initial plan was to buy four this year and three next year, but “Dell was offering 45 per cent off the price,” said Feldstein, managing partner for Feldstein Family Law Group.

“I might not get this opportunity again at such a good price.”

Upgrading current computers

Businesses commonly buy new computers for staff every three to four years.

Presuming the computers are in good overall shape, cost-conscious law firms can breathe new life into their current machines by upgrading certain components. Steps like maximizing RAM and replacing stock hard disk drives (HDDs) with solid state drives (SSDs) may result in new-machine performance at a lower cost than buying new computers.

SSDs are relatively new storage options and their prices are increasingly competitive with HDDs on a per-gigabyte basis. They offer better performance than HDDs since, instead of containing moving platters, SSDs are HDD-shaped enclosures for non-volatile memory chips. SSDs work as fast as RAM and consume much less power than HDDs, a boon for notebook battery life. Switchers to SSDs notice benefits like faster boot-up, faster application launching and greater overall responsiveness.

It's usually easier to upgrade more components in desktop computers, from sound cards to video cards to extra storage. Detailed instruction videos abound on YouTube as well as on certain vendor websites, helping to turn many computer owners into DIY upgraders.

Feldstein does not upgrade his firm's computers.

“If we buy the right computer, it should last,” he said. “The notebooks we're moving to support staff are about four or five years old. They still work well.”

Backups and peripherals

Feldstein runs two separate backups on his firm's data: one to a cloud service every two hours and one to a hard disk in case of an Internet outage. A staff member takes the disk offsite each night and brings in another each morning, rotating through several disks so that the firm has several days' worth of backups stored offsite.

Smart peripheral choices can improve a lawyer's productivity. Where possible, get

peripherals that connect to the office network. That makes it easier for staff to share devices like printers, scanners and multi-function machines. Even if you run a one-person office, peripherals that connect to the network mean fewer cords creating a tangle around your computer.

When you work from two or more monitors, you can keep more documents active as you work. This may help reduce printing costs and speed up work overall. Staff in Feldstein's office use three monitors — two external plus the one on their notebooks.

Consider mounting monitors on arms or stands that let the monitors swivel to face either side of a desk. This makes sharing documents easier and, again, reduces the need to print.

Most computers can connect to one external monitor. Two or more may call for a “video splitter” device, and extra video card or, for notebooks, a dock that handles multiple monitor connections.

Feldstein standardized on docking stations that easily connect notebooks to peripherals: network connections, keyboards and mice, and the firm's standard-issue two external monitors. Some staff have their own printers and scanners.

Printers ship with a wide variety of features, not all of which lawyers value equally. Lawyers on a budget can rank the features that matter most to them so they know what trade-offs they can make.

Connectivity to the office network makes printers easy to share among staff without the need to string cables from printer to router, and enables printing from smartphones and tablets. Mobile devices can print to models equipped with AirPrint (Apple iOS devices) and Google Cloud Print (Android devices), saving people time when they want to print documents that they have on mobile devices but not on their computers.

Feldstein runs PrintAudit, network-based software that tracks every document staff prints and records it in the firm's billing system as a disbursement.

Scanners are an office's first line of defence against paper creep. To digitize lengthy documents more easily, look for scanners that offer duplex (double-sided) scanning, automatic sheet feeders and Adobe Acrobat licences.

Law offices large and small frequently lease high-quality network printers/scanners/copiers, thus outsourcing their care and feeding to third parties. Should these printers contain hard disk drives, ensure the print jobs they store do not exit the office with the machine when the lease expires.



Legal Counsel, Labour Relation and Employment Team Toronto Area

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