

THE LAWYERS WEEKLY

Going remote, and worry-free

Working outside the office is no big deal anymore

By Grant Cameron

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Gone are the days when a lawyer would have to stay at the office till sundown.

These days, lawyers can work from just about anywhere — as long as they have the right equipment and Internet access.

All it takes is a laptop, an iPad or smartphone.

With today's highly-developed networks and computer programs, lawyers can tap into the office from just about any remote location, negating the need for lengthy commutes. Paperless office systems also allow lawyers to download electronic files instead of toting briefcases full of materials.

"A lot of lawyers are opening up more to the idea of working remotely and through mobile capacities," says business and technology lawyer Allan Oziel of Toronto. "There are so many advantages in technology and so many options available now for lawyers to work remotely or telecommute."

With technology like virtual private networks and remote desktops that allow lawyers to connect to their computers at the office, it makes sense for lawyers to embrace the practice, he says.

"You can sort of work through your own computer at work even though you're outside of the office," says Ozeil, assistant

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corporate secretary of the Canadian Information Processing Society, a national society of IT professionals, and member of the Toronto Computer Lawyers Group.

"To me, there's no reason why a law firm shouldn't be set up with some sort of option to let a lawyer work remotely."

Oziel, for example, can access the servers at his office remotely via his computer. It's a benefit to him because he often has to visit clients and he doesn't want to take documents with confidential information on a thumb drive or go to his office, print them out and carry them with him.

"If you're connected to your server remotely then as soon as you close the laptop nobody can really access that information unless they log back into the computer. It's safer than having it on a USB drive."

If he's somewhere public, though, Ozeil does keep an eye out for anyone trying to read a document on his computer.

"You have to be considerate of privacy and confidentiality of client files. For example, if you're on a train, somebody could literally peer over and look at your computer screen and see the client name."

Andrew Feldstein, of Feldstein Family Law Group in Markham, Ont., says he always carries his laptop and iPhone with him when he goes to court or settlement meetings.

He also uses the document management software Worldox that allows him to access files that might take up to two banker's boxes.

"In less than five minutes, I can transfer the entire file to my laptop, so I will have everything in PDF on my laptop. It's searchable by keyword, the entire file, the same as if I was at my desk," he says.

Feldstein also travels with a USB mini-monitor which he can plug into his laptop, enabling him to operate two monitors. The benefit is that he can look at two sets of documents at the same time.

"I can have one monitor for notes and one monitor for court documents so when the other lawyer says, 'Let's look at this affidavit,' I can follow it on one screen and take notes on the other."

Feldstein uses his laptop at court when he attends settlement meetings and when he goes to a conference or on vacation, but he prefers his iPhone for other occasions.

"I'm certainly not going to be bringing my laptop to a baseball game, but I'll have my iPhone there so if one of my staff needs me for something during the game I can review the materials."

When heading to a location where Internet connectivity might be a problem, Feldstein carries a Rocket Stick which plugs into the USB port on his laptop.

"The key component is making sure you have access to the web and that you're wired all the time."

John McLeish of McLeish Orlando in Toronto admits he's an "efficiency and productivity freak" who doesn't go anywhere without his computer. He makes use of every moment of his spare time.

"If I'm going to be stuck on a plane for three hours I can't be at a wireless meeting but I can download material. Instead of having two briefcases in the overhead luggage compartment above me I have a 2.8-pound computer. I can download five, 10 or 25 files so I have them on the plane."

His firm is making use of the latest technology, including Primafact, a paperless office system that enables lawyers to retrieve any document in a case.

"There's no running around saying, 'Get me this document.' We can access everything so quickly."

The firm also makes use of conference calls and uses Time Matters, software that enables everyone on a case to access information quickly.

McLeish has on occasion experienced problems with Wi-Fi at hotels, but for the most part it's not been a problem.

As for distractions, he says he hasn't had any troubles working remotely. In fact, in many ways he's more productive.

"I'm in the office, except I'm away from the distractions," he says, noting that sometimes while on a trip he gets up early and goes to the lobby of his hotel and puts in three hours work before anyone gets up.

"I'm doing my e-mails and I'm looking at my files. I could be in my office except that there's no one bothering me."

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