Computer Concepts and Legal Applications

The following computer concepts will be discussed along with their relationship to specific legal applications. The continuing focus will be upon the relationship of these concepts to the practice of law. Applying these concepts to your cases will provide the instant control over the factual and legal information on behalf of your client.
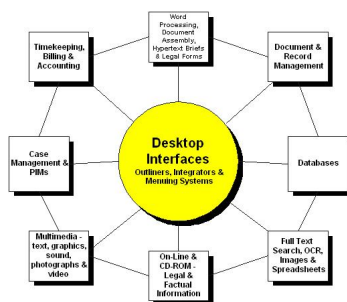
Desktop Interfaces - Outliners, Integrators and Menuing Systems

Since there is no comprehensive software product to handle all of the above functions there is a need to tie together the different software applications in order to access case information. Some of the approaches to handle this problem have been to use a desktop interface, outliner, integrator or menuing system.

These interfaces sometimes have been called an "attorney's workstation" or "attorney's desktop" to reflect in some way how an attorney practices law. They have been developed to interface, launch or access the different legal tasks in a hopefully understandable method for the legal professional. Generally on the same computer screen one can access the firm's administrative functions as well as access specific case information. For example, a menuing system may have an icon that you configure to launch into the firm's billing program and word processor.

"An ideal work environment at a firm today may both practices support assist with training efforts built around

Another goal is to let the professional's tasks determine the functionality offering independent work toe

The desktop interface has moved from a DOS menuing system to a Windows menuing system to an Internet browser type of interface. With the strong emergence of the Internet and Intranets the web browser desktop metaphor is beginning to become the desktop of choice.

From the desktop browser you can launch applications such as a word processor, spreadsheet, etc. and at the same time connect to different parts of the world or your local LAN using the web interface.

Many of these programs enable the user to "customize" the interface to reflect the individual practice and preferences of the user. For example, Windows as a menuing system is taking more of a functional work approach as opposed to a software product approach. Instead of clicking on an icon to open Microsoft Word™ one is able to set up a legal document as an icon. By clicking on the icon it will enable you to go directly into the legal document. This approach is long overdue and reflects the way one works on a case.

Outliners are one of the best front-end tools for lawyers to use as an interface to the substance of one's case or other law office functions. Outliners inherently reflect the way lawyers think. In any case we have a set number of tasks and other matters that have to be accomplished. Whether it is incorporating a company or representing our client in a personal injury case a plan of action needs to be developed. An outliner or similar interface can provide this function as well as the capability to customize the links that will permit one to access different information sources for your case.

Outlining programs are extremely useful in organizing your case. An outliner is what the name implies. It enables one to create an outline of any or all of your case. Whether you are involved in commercial transactions, litigation or any specialty the outliner can be your case notebook. An outliner screen is blank when initially accessed and enables the user to customize it for his

or her case. After typing in the main case management components such as Legal Issues or Witnesses then one can create subheadings for these areas in the outlining program. After creating subheadings these can be collapsed and expanded depending on which part of the case you are working on. If you create a Witness main heading then all of the witnesses can be the next level subheading and then these subheadings can be reorganized at the touch of a key. It is not necessary to cut and paste, but merely move the witness notes, which can include direct and cross-examination notes, to the new location. Many attorneys rave about the benefits of outlining programs because they function like a lawyer "thinks". It enables them to "outline" their case in the same fashion as a case or trial notebook.
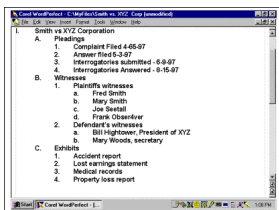
Other outliner features include the capability to move blocks or headlines quickly for a different arrangement of your key points. Generally, outliners include word processing features such as line wrapping, adjustable margins, indents, line spacing, clipboard functions, spell checker, search and replace features, and so on. Second, you can use the search feature to locate a specific witness name and address or the date a particular court order was entered. The search feature permits you to locate any information in the outline in seconds. If you have a question about a proposed direct examination of a witness, a simple search will locate this information immediately.

Some additional legal applications of an outlining program are to organize appellate arguments, set up the question areas for direct and cross examination, set forth the legal issues that need to be researched, to do lists or a list of exhibits of your case with a listing of any evidentiary issues for the document. Since it is created by the user it can be used for any legal application which requires an organizational approach. Outliners can be found in word processing programs and more recently are finding their way into litigation support programs such as Summation™. Below is an example of Summations's outlining feature. This outliner also permits one to insert links to view video depositions and other multimedia information from the outliner.