10 essential technology skills and practices

Technology has become an essential part of practising law and working in a law office. This column summarizes 10 essential technology skills and practices with which every lawyer and law office staff person should be familiar.

1. Learn keyboard shortcuts

Odds are your hands are on the keyboard most of the time. Taking them off to reach for the mouse just breaks your rhythm and slows you down. With keyboard shortcuts you can do almost everything you can do with a mouse – the key is learning the shortcuts for the various programs you use.

Basic Windows and document editing shortcuts are described below. Take time to learn the shortcuts for the most common tasks you complete in the programs you most frequently use. You will be able to complete things much faster.

To learn and use keyboard shortcuts you should be familiar with the syntax for describing them. Simply remember that a plus sign (+) between two or more keys means that you press those keys, in the order they are listed, almost simultaneously, moving from left to right. For example, a capital B would be described as Shift+B. You release them in the opposite order.

2. Alt+Tab for switching between programs

Switching between open programs is one of the most frequent things we all do as we work on our computers. For this task most of us use a mouse to select a button on the task bar. There is a much faster way.

Pressing Alt+Tab will open a rectangular grey pop-up window in the centre of your screen. It will have an icon for each program that is running on your computer. Hold down the Alt key, and repeatedly press Tab to jump from one icon to the next. To help you find the window you want, the text from the title bar of each window appears in a box at the bottom of the pop-up. Simply release both keys when you get to the window you want.

In this pop-up window, the icons are presented, from left to right, in the order you last looked at their respective windows. This means that the window you were in previous to the current one is just one Alt+Tab away. This lets you jump back and forth between two programs in the blink of an eye.

3. Switching between documents

On occasion you will want to jump from one document to another within a single program. For example, switching between two or more letters within Word. Use Ctrl+F6 to do this. Hold down the Ctrl key, and repeatedly hit F6. Again, release both keys when you get to the document you want. This shortcut works on many, but not all, Windows programs.

4. Jumping text shortcuts

Even the most experienced computer users often take the long road when it comes to editing text and moving around a document. They're either clicking away like crazy with the mouse, or using the arrow keys to move the cursor around a document, one character or line at a time. With a few simple shortcuts you can move around a document much more quickly.

When editing a document, the following shortcuts help you jump a whole word, or even a whole paragraph, with a single press of an arrow key:

- Ctrl+Right Arrow will jump the cursor forward a whole word at a time;
- Ctrl+Left Arrow will jump the cursor backwards a whole word at a time;
- Ctrl+Down Arrow will jump you down a whole paragraph at a time;
- Ctrl+Up Arrow will jump you up a whole paragraph at a time.

If you want to select or block a larger portion of text, add the Shift key to the above combinations:

- Ctrl+Shift+Right Arrow will jump the cursor forward a whole word and select the text at the same time;
- Ctrl+Shift+Left Arrow will jump the cursor backwards a whole word and select the text at the same time;
- Ctrl+Shift+Down Arrow will jump you down a whole paragraph and select the text at the same time;
- Ctrl+Shift+Up Arrow will jump you up a whole paragraph and select the text at the same time.

After blocking the words, sentences or paragraphs you wanted to select, you can copy, move, or reformat as you wish.

5. Cut, copy and paste

Why retype things when you don't have to? The ability to transfer text or other data from one program to another via cut, copy and paste is one of the most powerful features of Windows.

To move or copy text or other data (e.g. a picture) you must first select or highlight it.

Next, to move the text, press Ctrl+X or Cut on the Standard toolbar (the button with scissors). To copy the text, press Ctrl+C or click the Copy button (two white sheets of paper).

The text you are moving or copying is now in the Windows Clipboard, a temporary holding area.

Now move your cursor and click where you want to place the text you are moving or copying. This can be somewhere else in

the source document, another document in the same application, or even a completely different program.

To add or "paste" the text in the new location, press Ctrl+V or click the Paste button (a clipboard with a sheet of paper). The text will appear in the new location.

If you want to clean up the format of pasted text, use Paste Special.

6. Paste Special
Want to add text from a website or other source to an e-mail or Word or WordPerfect document and not deal with formatting issues (i.e. just get the basic text with no formatting)? You can use the Paste Special function to do this.

Highlight and "copy" the text you want to copy and paste. Next, place the cursor at the point you want to add it to your document. But instead of clicking the "Paste" icon, click on "Edit", then "Paste Special", and then select the "Unformatted" option. The text will adopt the format of the receiving document and any formatting from the source document will be lost.

7. Text formatting shortcuts
Few things are more finicky than typing case citations. With these three keyboard shortcuts case typing citations will be a breeze:

• Press Ctrl+B to turn Bold on/off

• Press Ctrl+I to turn Italics on/off

• Press Ctrl+U to turn underline on/off

Two things to note, you can use these shortcuts together, and they are all toggles, that is, pressing the noted key combination cycles between on and off.

If you want to type a case name in the middle of a sentence with bold and underline do the following: When you get to the point the case name starts, simply press Ctrl+B, then Ctrl+I, then type the case name. To turn bold and underline off, press Ctrl+B and then Ctrl+I again, and continue with the sentence.

8. Use A "right click" for format and configuration settings
There are many formatting and configuration settings buried away in various menus and dialog boxes. They can be very hard to find. The "right click" button on your mouse comes to the rescue and makes many of these settings available with a simple right mouse click.

These options and features are "context sensitive" – in other words, you will be presented with a list of choices that are relevant to the item, field or text you are right clicking on. For example, in Outlook, right clicking on an e-mail in your Inbox presents you with Open, Print, Reply, Reply all, Forward etc. Right clicking on text in a Word document gives you access to font, text and paragraph formatting settings.

You can right click on almost everything on your desktop – try it!

9. Eliminate your biggest daily interruption: Banish the new e-mail pop-up
Many people are presented with a beep and the "new message" pop-up window every single time a new e-mail message arrives in their Inbox. This is a huge interruption. Your train of thought gets interrupted and you get bounced out of whatever you were working on.

To get more done, turn off that notification window! Go with just the beep if you have to. And, if you don't need to know the instant when something arrives in your inbox (and most of the time you don't), consider turning off the beep too. You're going to check your inbox reasonably regularly anyway.

10. Poor docketing habits let time and money slip through your fingers
To make sure you capture all the time spent by lawyer and staff time keepers in your office, everyone should do the following:

Directly enter their own dockets on their computer. This saves time and transcription errors by eliminating the double-entry by another staff person.

Docket work throughout the day. Trying to create dockets for work done earlier in the day (much less in the more distant past) is very time-consuming, and not likely to be very accurate or complete. Some studies have indicated contemporaneously recording time dockets capture 20 per cent more time.

Most time and billing programs have a timer feature to help track how much time you have spent on any given task. It works just like a stopwatch. Most lawyers grossly underestimate the time they spent on individual tasks. Try timing your own tasks; you will be shocked by how much time you are missing. If you get interrupted while working on one task, pause or close the docket for it, and create a new docket for the new task. Re-open the original docket when you return to the task. At the end of the day, you should still review your dockets. Look for missed time, and make any necessary corrections or additions while things are still fresh in your mind.

Create detailed dockets. For example, "telephone conference with client re details of weekend access problems." Detailed dockets serve as a record of the work you did on a file, and for communicating to the client what was done.

Docket every minute spent on a file. Wait until you final or interim bill the file, at which time you can properly judge all the factors that determine what should be billed on the matter.

Make sure all the lawyers and staff in your office know, understand and use the above tips and practices. They will help improve firm profitability by letting all technology users be more efficient.