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Using Computer Savvy to Build Workplace Relationships

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Special to the Legal

The legal profession has long been maligned as resistant to change, and there's truth to that stereotype—at least when it comes to technology. Whether working in government, public interest or private practice, horror stories abound of attorneys shackled to outmoded applications like Corel WordPerfect and Clinton administration-era editions of the Microsoft Office Suite. Fearing that attempts to revamp the status quo will be met with suspicion or hostility, many millennial lawyers sit silent as their superiors skip over formulas and fill in spreadsheets by hand and print out and re-scan documents instead of directly converting to PDFs.

In my experience, however, older colleagues are often open to learning about time- and cost-saving tech strategies. The key is knowing the



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time and place to make constructive suggestions and being prepared to help the less tech-savvy conquer the computer learning curve. This includes administrative assistants and other personnel who are essential to the success of your legal team. In addition to streamlining your own day-to-day legal practices, you can reap rewards by deepening your professional relationships and standing out as someone with a can-do attitude and a personal investment in your organization's success.

While there is no one-size-fits-all strategy, here are five basic takeaways that I have found helpful in my own practice:

- **You don't need to be an expert.**

As the first generation to grow up with both personal computers and the internet, millennials have a natural-born technological advantage over baby boomers and Gen Xers. The great news is that you don't need to be a computer genius to offer something of value to your colleagues. Basic computer proficiency by our generation's standards is enough.

I'm probably a six out of 10 on the millennial technological scale, meaning that I could make a mean Geocities homepage back in the day and I am now a competent internet navigator, app consumer and Microsoft Office user. But a millennial six is a Gen Xer nine and a baby boomer 12, so I can still offer pointers and insight to most of my older coworkers.

- **Never assume that older colleagues know less.**

No one appreciates being stereotyped, and just as we millennials loathe being labeled as "special snowflakes," our

older co-workers dislike being talked down to as tech illiterate. Age and technological ability are not inextricably linked; the late Steve Jobs would now qualify for reduced Social Security benefits, and Sergey Brin is protected by age discrimination in employment laws. After all, not all computer whiz kids go on to build a better PC or create a revolutionary search engine. And some even end up in the law.

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The best practice is to be observant and make constructive suggestions as needed. For example, if you're updating a PowerPoint presentation and notice the same bullet point list increasing in length across multiple slides, save a new version that uses animation effects to make it all happen in one slide, with some added flair. Casually mention this among the other changes you've made, and if your colleague expresses interest, you can explain what you did and offer to show how it's done. Even if they're not up for learning the nitty gritty, they'll probably appreciate your efforts now and seek your assistance again in the future.

- **Always strive for improvement.**

While we're now the tech-savvy new kids on the block, the fledgling

members of Generation Z, who are being exposed to tablets and smartphones as early as preschool, will probably leave us in the dust well before they join the legal profession.

Still, if we make an effort to keep up now, we'll have a much easier time keeping pace later. This includes taking the time to learn techniques that can have an immediate positive effect on streamlining your legal practice. If you're an Excel spreadsheet formula expert but don't know a pivot table from a rocking chair, work through a few tutorials and you'll soon be a data crunching superstar. Likewise, learning the ins and outs of Microsoft Word macros will make drafting form documents a snap.

- **Don't limit yourself to lawyers.**

In addition to your attorney colleagues, keep an eye out for helpful tips you can pass along to paralegals, administrative assistants and other personnel who are equally important to your organization's success. Maximizing efficiency helps lawyers in all settings but can be especially crucial in private practice, where billing is always at issue and clients increasingly expect more services for less money.

Taking the time to train appropriate personnel to master borderline administrative functions, like gathering information from online databases and creating spreadsheets for basic data analysis, will lead to fewer of your hours being cut from the bill and

more positive recognition from partners and clients. Even if you work in a nonbillable hour setting, no one will complain if you start finishing more work in less time.

- **Mentorship is a two-way street.**

Just as you want your older and wiser colleagues to keep an open door and show you the ropes of the legal profession, you should be equally willing to assist with routine tech questions. In addition to work-related printer, scanner and fax machine problems, you may be asked for help with navigating mobile websites and working smartphone and tablet apps.

All are great opportunities to show your superiors that you're not just a dedicated team player, but also a kind and considerate person. You may find that colleagues from other departments start reaching out to you, and this can give you a chance to build deeper relationships beyond your everyday team.

Depending on your area of specialty and the nature of your organization, this list only scratches the surface of the many ways you can use technology to positively stand out among your peers. It all boils down to being observant and proactive. •