



So, You're Not A "Computer Person"?

Technology, Privacy, and eCommerce



You've just purchased a new car, but it was late when you took delivery, so you skipped the offered walk-through of its controls. You headed home, and rain began to fall; you searched for the wipers but only managed to illuminate the cruise-control indicator (or was that the traction-control warning?). A month later, you still can't find the wipers. When it rains, you either pull over and pout or just try to squint through it, cursing the "stupid car" for making your life so miserable. At a reception one evening, you share your woes with friends; they console you with their sympathy and acknowledgements that they can't use their wipers either, because they're just not "car people."

Sound ridiculous? I hope so (especially if you drive near me), but change "cars" to "computers" and "wipers" to "email," and you've probably been party to the conversation many times: "I get so much email, and the urgent stuff is hidden among countless newsletters, advertisements and 'reply all' responses to things I don't care about! But what can I do? I'm just not a 'computer person.'" Here's the thing: You are a "computer person," just like you're a "telephone person" and a "doorknob person." You may not love it, and it may exasperate you daily, but it's integral to your life as a small law counsel (and a person on Earth), and a few minutes' effort can go a long way toward tamping down chaos.

The late self-help guru Stephen Covey urged us to "sharpen the saw," by which he meant that time spent improving the effectiveness of the tools we use pays dividends going forward and conversely that the "dull saw" requires ever-greater effort just to keep up. We participate in continuing legal education for this very purpose. Why, then, are we reluctant to take a similar approach to the tools we use every day? Actually, many of us must also be somewhat reluctant to get continuing legal education or I suspect it wouldn't be an externally imposed requirement. I'm not advocating for mandatory "saw-sharpening" training for in-house counsel, but I do believe it's worthwhile to come to it voluntarily.

What tools am I talking about? We could discuss word processing, online research and others, but for now, let's stick to email. Outlook and its competitors have long had features that reduce many frustrations inherent in email, and we in small law, bereft as we so often are of administrative support to jump or remove these hurdles, stand to benefit the most from mastering them.

You can make a lot of headway in this area with a goal in mind and a few minutes' effort whenever you think, "I wish I didn't have to ..." followed by whatever drudgery or inconvenience you're confronted by. Resources abound; sometimes, a right-click of the mouse when the pointer is over something that bothers me brings up multiple options for relief. There's a daily e-blast that I want to keep receiving but isn't a high priority. With this right-click trick, I'm only seconds away from making this e-blast, and each one that follows it, skip my inbox and land in a folder called "semi-interesting stuff," where I'll see it only when I find myself with the time and inclination to pore through it (i.e., during mandatory-but-pointless conference calls).

A few more clicks, and I can make my replies land in the same folder as the thing I'm replying to instead of the vast sea of "sent mail." Need more context? Search "how do I filter email in Outlook" in Google, Bing or the like, and choose any article that comes up on the first page. Also, the F1 key on every application on your computer will invoke a "help" window that'll take you quickly to instructions about everything the application does.

Before law school, I had a brief stint selling cars. I once sold a manual-transmission-equipped car to a nurse who'd never driven one but whose budget was such that the price difference was compelling. I taught her to drive it only after persuading her she'd already mastered much more challenging and important tasks that I could never do (such as putting needles in people).

The same is true for us — we already manage multiple complex and difficult tasks. If we can successfully preserve privilege in an internal investigation, surely we can control our inboxes. A few minutes invested today will pay back many more going forward!

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