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Your Own Tech Toolbox

Technology, Privacy, and eCommerce



Just as there are certain basic tools that every carpenter, surgeon, or fisherman must have, the same goes for lawyers. It occurred to me that, although I have been writing about a wide-variety of tech tools in this column, I have yet to focus on the basic necessities.

Hardware: Although this is beginning to change, our IT departments usually dictate which electronic devices we can use. However, among these devices, I have found that most IT departments will generally grant you some variation if you ask them nicely. I recommend seeing what they have to offer.

If you think that all laptops and smartphones are the same, you're wrong. Because you use these tools for multiple hours a day, I suggest picking the brand that suits you best. You should consider the device's keyboard, screen, storage capacity, speed, and connectivity before making a purchase.

Word processors: All lawyers need apps to transform their thoughts into writing. Ten years ago, the only tool for most lawyers was Microsoft Word. However, that is no longer the case. There are multiple new platforms available, including dedicated longform writing apps like Scrivener or Ulysses, collaborative writing apps like Google Docs or Dropbox Paper, and Word alternatives like Apple Pages.

In addition, you should consider trying a text editor. Popularized for writing computer code, these lightweight apps intentionally omit the formatting found in most word processors. As a result, documents made with a text editor can be universally read by any computer. If you want your audience to read something on Word, they will require their own copy of the software to open it. Plain text, however, can be read by anyone. It can be easily posted to the Web, using simple HTML tools like Markdown, and uses almost no storage space on your device.

Calendar apps: What makes a calendar app good? First, it must work well across multiple devices. Nobody wants a calendar app that requires you to make duplicate entries for each device. Second, it must work in the way that suits you best. While many digital calendars closely resemble old paper planners, some provide more personalized options. Third, it must be easy to input. Traditional calendar apps require you to fill in a tedious amount of information before you can create an entry. Some softwares, however, have a far easier interface. Just dictating, "Lunch with Jamie at Fishers' next Tuesday," will seamlessly create a calendar entry called "Lunch," with the time set at noon, the location set at Fishers' restaurant, and an invitation sent to the Jamie from your contact list.

Email apps: Remember that Outlook is not your only option. There are multiple new email interfaces that can help you process email efficiently, block spam, keep an extensive archive, and respond with ease. Apps like Dispatch and Airmail on iOS, Postbox (Windows and Mac), and Gmail offer some terrific features to help you slay the email monster.

Browsers: We are increasingly working with browsers. Look for one that suits you best. Most people are familiar with Internet Explorer, Safari, Chrome, and Firefox, but there are other good ones too. Independent of which browser you pick, you also should consider what search engine to use. Google and Bing are not the only option. I tend to prefer DuckDuckGo. As with all of these suggestions, do some basic research and then make an informed decision on which suits you best.

Task managers: As lawyers, we have too many commitments to justify not having a good task management system. Dedicated task management apps focus all of your attention on the highest priority tasks, without distracting you with menial objectives. Some people use their email or calendar apps for this purpose. Although these can work well, I recommend using softwares such as Outlook Tasks, Todoist, Wunderlist, or Omnifocus (my personal favorite).

Obviously this is not a complete list of the essential tools for your tech toolbox. However, I hope this will get you thinking about which tools you are currently using and why you are using them. And please, let me know what tools you like best and why.

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