CHARLES CHRISTIAN's
LEGAL TECHNOLOGY iNSIDER

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO WHAT'S HOT (AND WHAT'S NOT) IN LAW OFFICE SYSTEMS

JGR GO LIVE WITH INTRANET

Jeffrey Green Russell, which has been consistently at the forefront of Internet technology since 1994 when the West End practice became the first UK law firm to establish its own Web site, has scored another first by going "live" with its own fully fledged intranet.

The technology JGR has adopted is Netscape Navigator 3.0 software providing the browser interface across a Windows NT network. The pages of information on the intranet are being developed using a number of products, including Microsoft FrontPage. Although designed as primarily an *internal* network, "firewall" security means designated users can also have access to the *external* Internet and the World Wide Web.

Senior partner Clive Whitfield-Jones said one of the main reasons why the firm embarked on the project was that it already had to supply staff with a large volume of regularly updated paper-based information and it was felt the task could be carried out more efficiently if the material was published electronically.

Material already on the intranet includes: internal phone lists, billing procedures, user guides to the firm's main IT systems, the library catalogue, Law Society rules on professional under-takings and mandatory procedures for handling client monies.

Future projects will encompass the firm's IT help desk, staff bulletin boards, internal discussion groups and a practice legal "know how" system. ➡

➡ It sounds ambitious but IT manager Alison Sykes says that with the tools at their disposal it is possible to take a five page "hard copy" document and publish it to everyone within the firm via intranet within 20 minutes.

"Conventional documents take time to create, distribute and update – and then you can never lay your hands on a copy when you really want it," says Sykes. "With the intranet not only is each document only a few mouse clicks away but you can also run full text searches across the system to locate specific items of information."

Despite the system's novelty, Sykes says it has been enthusiastically greeted by staff who have been trained in its use. Whitfield-Jones believes this is because it is being used to deliver familiar information and services more efficiently, so users can see the obvious benefits and actually want to use it.

The JGR intranet complements the firm's existing Novell GroupWise email and groupware network and will be in practice wide use by all partners, fee earners and staff by January. ❐

FUTURE OF HIGH STREET KIT IN THE BALANCE

Further uncertainties now cloud the future of the English Law Society's High Street Starter Kit (HSSK) software project.

Following the announcement that Law Society Services director Geoff Bignell is to leave Chancery Lane in the New Year, the Society is reviewing the projects his department is involved with and is expected to decide at December's council meeting whether to continue with the HSSK project. ❐

New faces at Norwel

Recent staff appointments at Norwel Computer Services (✆ 0161 945 3511) include Sharon Hall, who was previously with Axxia and MSS and will now be handling London-area sales with Norwel's new London branch manager Simon Connolly. Simon was previously with Resolution Systems and LawTech. Other new joiners include Vivienne Laurence and Sarah Spencer on marketing.

Year 2000 warning

City of London solicitors Rowe & Maw have published a guide to *The Millennium Timebomb*. For copies call Chris Pullen on ✆ 0171 248 4282. For more about Year 2000 related computer problems turn to page 6.

DELOITTE'S CLAIM ACCOUNTS SYSTEMS ARE INADEQUATE

Speaking at last week's *LITigate '96* conference in London, Deloitte & Touche partner Gary Simon claimed that almost half the accounts systems in use in larger law firms currently provide inadequate management information.

According to the survey carried out by Deloitte & Touche, while nearly 89% of respondents felt their systems "competently and reliably" processed large volumes of client/matter transactions, "almost half" were disappointed by their systems' limited management reporting and analysis capabilities.

Other complaints included: lack of integration between accounts systems and other practice management modules, such as marketing databases; difficulty in accessing data; the inability to produce ad-hoc reports without extensive manual manipulation of data; and poor integration with front office systems, such as spreadsheets. Less than 25% had *dynamic* links to accounts files, with the result most users had to manually rekey data into spreadsheets.

Simon says the findings show suppliers who continue to re-invest in their products and take advantage of newer technologies "have broken out of the pack and are now highly regarded".

As for the rest of the market, Simon believes the use of third-party *middleware* and similar EIS software can prolong the active life of older *legacy* accounts systems, by giving users the information management tools they need. But, longer term, he predicts that as firms replace systems to ensure Year 2000 compatibility, there will be a "rapid shake out of the weakest providers" whose products have fallen behind.

☞ **Technical Note...** The survey was conducted earlier this year when Deloitte approached the 500 largest ➡

➡ firms in the UK – so the results are inevitably slanted towards the "top end" of the market. Approximately 200 firms (40%) replied.

Respondents were also asked to rate the strengths and weaknesses of their accounts systems. After those with less than 5 user sites were excluded, a total of 10 packages were compared. Elite gained the highest score, closely followed by Axxia.

For copies of the survey report (which does not include the comparative analysis of the different supplier ratings) contact Gary Simon at Deloitte & Touche (✆ 0171 303 6567). ❑

FOX WILLIAMS SIGNS UP FOR TELEMATION PROJECT

City of London commercial and IT law specialists Fox Williams has become the first solicitors practice in the UK to join the Legal Telemation programme.

The programme, which is being coordinated on behalf of the European Union's Business & Innovation Centres network by Irish IT consultancy Coolfin (✆ + 353 51 387477), is intended to pull together computing and communications technologies on the lawyer's desktop.

According to Fox Williams partner Nigel Miller: "Our IT systems must meet the increasing demands of our clients for higher levels of information and communications services. The convergence of computing and telecoms through Telemation enable us to build an information structure so our lawyers and support staff can respond to these demands. We see the Telemation programme as the most secure way of harnessing these technologies."

Fox Williams has been piloting the project for some months and has now begun its practice-wide implementation. Brophys in Dublin is also involved in a Telemation project and it is understood that Jobling & Knape, which has offices throughout Lancashire, is also reviewing possible involvement. ❑

NEW SPREADSHEET GUIDE TO LEGAL ACCOUNTS SYSTEMS

With at least three directories now offering comprehensive guides to the legal software available in England & Wales, a problem many firms face today is not finding information but coping with a surfeit of data. Management consultants Hames Robinson Associates think they have an answer.

Called *Accounting Software for Solicitors*, Hames Robinson have produced a publication that combines a comprehensive guide to choosing and using solicitors accounts software, with vendor profiles and an in-depth analysis of the features of the accounts packages available from (currently) 17 leading legal software houses.

Nothing new in this but the guide does have one important edge, namely the analysis is also available in Microsoft Excel 4 spreadsheet format. Apart from making it easier to compare features, the spreadsheet offers users an opportunity to *weight* the way the data is presented so as to reflect their practice's priorities.

For example, if price or the ability to run on existing 386 PC hardware is important, systems meeting these criteria will receive a better rating than those that do not. Or, as Richard Robinson of Hames Robinson puts it: "It allows the user to ask not only which is the best package but also which is the best package for *me*?"

☞ **Comment…** With a price of just £95, the guide equates to less than a couple of hours of an IT consultant's time and used correctly could be a very valuable tool. There are however two important qualifications to make: The first is that to get the best out of this system, you do need to be able to operate (and own) a copy of Excel or a similar spreadsheet that allows you to import Excel files.

Secondly, and more critically, because there are only 17 suppliers on ➡

➡ the system, there are some major gaps in its coverage. Omissions include Perfect Software, Avenue Legal, Quill, SOS, Videss, Solace, Professional Technology, Pilgrim, Legato/Paragon and Access, as well as most of the "top end" players, such as Miles 33, Norwel and Elite.

Like the curate's egg, this guide is good in parts but its patchy coverage must inevitably limit its value. Hames Robinson (✆ 01420 87395) also produce a companion report *Buying Software – a guide for the perplexed* (price £50). ❐

AMICUS BECOMES A TEAM PLAYER

Gavel & Gown, who distribute the Amicus Attorney range of software in the UK, have launched a new server-based product called Amicus Team.

Team stores all time, matter, diary and contacts information on a central database, so it can be shared by groups of fee earners working on the same projects or in the same department. Along with the usual benefits associated with groupware (coordinating timetables etc) the centralisation of contact information makes it easier to run checks for conflicts of interest.

☞ **Technical Note…** Team requires a server available to all users on the network and supporting Windows 3.1.1 or higher. Pricing is very attractive at £100 for the server licence and £50 per user.

But, it should be noted that in addition all users must also have either the Amicus Attorney or Amicus Assistant applications on their workstations. Users already running these products as stand-alone applications can upgrade to the Team version free of charge and all data is transferable.

Seven firms are already using Team on a practice wide basis and Gavel & Gown (✆ 01242 243344) are optimistic that other UK users, who now include the legal department of Cambridge City Council, will soon upgrade to Team. ❐

System delays

Preston-based systems house MIPAC (✆ 01772 909090) has admitted plans to launch a low cost legal accounts system built around the US CompuLaw Corporation's Great Plains Dynamics program are running behind schedule.

The 32-bit Windows application was set for a September launch but John Lowe of MIPAC says the date has now been put back to February 1997. Lowe says one of the problems is that it has taken longer than anticipated to sign up a local law firm as a pilot site.

Price set

IBM has announced the UK price for its new OS/2 Warp 4.0 operating system. The BonusPak, which includes the IBM Works suite and a microphone, costs £162 new or £107 to upgrade from earlier versions of OS/2.

Eastern promise

One of the most novel PDAs to appear in recent months is the Inventec Besta CD67 from Taiwan. The unit combines an electronic organiser, a calculator and a Chinese to English dictionary which uses hand writing recognition.

There is also a speech synthesis facility. Type in a word (or "write" it on the screen) in English or Chinese, press one of the buttons on the unit and you will hear the word "spoken" in Cantonese, Mandarin or English, which could be useful for lawyers wanting to learn some Chinese phrases.

The US price is $320 and further details can be found at http://www.besta.com.tw

FOCUS ON PALMTOP COMPUTERS, PDAS AND ORGANISERS

The last few weeks have seen a flurry of activity in the palmtop computer and electronic organiser market but do the latest releases actually offer anything new to the busy lawyer?

One of the most novel devices is the new **Pilot** system from US Robotics (✆ 0800 225252). It looks a great deal like the Apple Newton PDA (personal digital assistant) and – also like the Newton – allows the user to write in appointments and addresses using handwriting recognition software. (You can also "type" in data using a stylus to touch characters on the on-screen keyboard.)

It is small, light and allows you to exchange and synchronise data between the unit and files stored on a PC. But with an entry level price of £249 it is not cheap – there are plenty of conventional electronic organisers with keyboards that can do the same job at half the price. Also, the applications software currently available for it is limited: there is no spreadsheet and you have to run the Pilot program as the PIM on your desktop, so hard luck if you run Schedule + or Lotus Organiser.

If size is your criterion, you would do better to look at the new **Siena** from Psion (✆ 0990 143050) which is small and light enough to fit inside a shirt pocket. Despite its size, the keyboard is manageable (there is also a facility to expand the size of the text displayed on the screen for easy viewing) and it comes with the full range of Psion applications software, including database, calculator, diary, spreadsheet and a surprisingly sophisticated MS-Word-compatible word processor.

The communications port allows users to connect the Siena directly to a printer or a PC, so files can be printed, updated or exchanged. With prices starting at £169, this is excellent value for money but there are two important ➡

➡ qualifications. The first is that to save space Psion have omitted the solid state disk drives – if you need this, you need to buy an extra unit. And, the Siena also lacks the wider communications of its big brother, the recently launched **Series 3c**.

Although this looks the same as the earlier 3a, the software has been refined to give more control over style, there is now a built-in spellchecker and, most important of all, the system can now support the new Psion V32bis/14.4 kbps travel modem, so users can send and access Internet email. From next month 3c users can also buy a PC card modem adaptor, that supports both high speed modems and even GSM data cards for use with digital mobile phones. The 3c retails from £339.

If size is important and you can live with more limited functionality, go for the Siena. If communications capability has priority, opt for the 3c.

☞ **Comment...** Despite the fact they use proprietary technology, since 1990 the palmtop computing market has been dominated by the Psion Series 3 and, to a lesser extent, the Sharp ranges. But is this about to change?

At Comdex Fall IT industry trade show in Las Vegas last month, Microsoft launched its new Windows CE operating system for palmtops – or hand held personal computers (HPCs) as they now look like being called.

This employs a keyboard and touch sensitive screen to run email plus simplified versions of the Microsoft Word, Excel and Internet Explorer applications. More to the point, a raft of hardware suppliers, including Casio, NEC, Compaq, Hewlett-Packard, Hitachi and Philips, have already announced or launched CE compliant HPCs and more applications software can be expected shortly.

The first HPCs are slightly larger than Psions and US prices are expected to range from $300 to $1000. They should become commercially available in the UK in the first quarter of 1997. ❐

FUNCTIONALITY AND THE WINDOWS DEBATE

The recent feature on the different approaches to developing Windows applications (*see p.4 of Issue No 27*) clearly hit the right note with its recommendation that what really matters is the quality of design and functionality of the software rather than the brand of development tools used. However Michael Platt, the managing director of Solicitors Own Software reckons there are some other under-the-bonnet factors that may be important to purchasers...

"If a supplier uses a 4GL, the shorter development time is of benefit to the customer as well as the supplier," says Platt, "because it makes it much easier to respond to enhancement requests, and generally keep the product up-to-date/interesting by the continual addition of new features. This means a purchaser can be much more confident that their investment will remain current for longer."

Platt also warns that the choice of development language can dictate the flexibility or restriction of hardware and operating system platforms a product will run on, with the result a customer may wish to upgrade to a new platform but finds the software will not run on it.

☞ **Technical Note...** Examples of this in recent years include AS/400 users being unable to move to Unix, Unix users unable to move to Windows/NT and PC users unable to move from small shared file networks to larger multiuser projects.

Platt adds that although *client/server* computing "has not been quite the revolution that was hoped for," splitting the work between the two and thereby reducing network traffic is definitely more efficient than having to perform all the processing on the client workstation with just a shared file system on the server. ➥

➡ There is also an argument that if a system is built around a "proper" 4GL/database development platform, the data is also more secure (in the sense of being less less liable to corruption) than one based on a purely personal computer database such as FoxPro.

"Using a modern database," says Platt, "provides hugely improved security. The automatic transaction roll-back is great protection against inconsistencies in data. Without it you risk problems because any posting will normally comprise a lengthy sequence of inter-dependent updates and if the system goes down it is usually extremely difficult to be sure which updates took place and which did not. The only safe course is to go back to your last backup.

"With roll-back however the data-base keeps track of all updates being performed by each and every concurrent user, so if a transaction is not completed, it automatically reverses all the updates from the start of the transaction to the point of the failure."

☞ **Comment...** Final comments come from US software developer Greg Smith, who suggests the following database *acid test*: "Fire up the database, get multiple processes running, each creating related records in a couple of files and then kill the power to the server.

"If the database doesn't come right back up without a single orphan transaction, it's a toy and doesn't deserve real data. Last time I tried this with PC FoxPro, the database wouldn't come back at all without major rebuilding and I was never really sure how deep the damage was – whereas a modern 4GL like Progress deals with this without a hitch on every platform.

"No matter how hard you try to protect them, servers do occasionally go down. If your database system can't cope with this without corruption, it is no good for anything more business critical than collecting a list of the sandwiches people want for lunch." ❑

Glaisyers hit by IT thieves

Birmingham criminal law firm Glaisyers was hit by computer thieves last month, who broke into the firm's offices one Thursday night to steal the central file server and two laser printers. The firm's IT supplier Linetime (✆ 0113 250 0020) was able to replace the hardware by mid afternoon Friday and all software and data files were back up and running by Monday morning.

☞ **Reprints of the LTi *Survivors' Guide to Ram Raids* are still available from the Insider office.**

Consultants, don't you just love 'em

Ever had a good - or bad - experience with an IT consultant? Are there any you would recommend or use again? LTi would like to hear from you.

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1997 subscription rates for LEGAL TECHNOLOGY INSIDER remain unchanged at £95 (overseas £125) for 24 issues.

But, in response to reader requests a new two year subscription rate of £170 for 48 issues (overseas £225) - a saving of 10% on the normal annual rate - is now available.

TESTING FOR YEAR 2000 COMPLIANCE

The item in the last edition about the Millennium Bomb prompted a number of readers to ask if there were any simple tests they could run to check if their personal computers were Year 2000 compliant.

There are – providing you take the necessary precautions to safeguard your current data and applications and fully appreciate that because you are taking a step into the unknown, there is a risk you will cause a serious system crash.

Firstly, ensure you have taken or have up-to-date back-up copies of all current data, applications and system settings/preference files etc. Secondly, remove time delimited applications that are programmed to expire after a limited period of months. And, thirdly, ensure you have a friendly computer specialist you can call on in an emergency.

Turning to testing, the simplest way to check applications with diaries or date fields associated with them is to set a date in the 21st Century. If the software refuses to let you set an appointment or a diary reminder for January 2000 then you have a problem. If it does, also check it recognises that the Year 2000 is a leap year and can cope with appointments on the 29th February.

Because applications software is only part of the story, you also need to check your hardware will recognise the Millennium when it arrives. This is called the "real time clock rollover problem".

Set the PC's internal clock to a couple of minutes to midnight on 31st December 1999, turn the computer off and then five minutes later switch it back on again. If your PC is Millennium proof it should display a time of a few minutes past midnight on 1st January 2000. But, if the date displayed is 1st January 1900 or 1980 then you have a problem.

Assuming you pass this hurdle, you also need to check for the "real time clock setting problem" which means ➡

➡ although the PC can support a "rollover" to a new century, you cannot reset the date after 31st December 1999. To test for this, set the date to 1st December 2000, turn the system off, wait a couple of minutes and then restart. If it still says 1st December 2000, you should be home and dry and can relax !   ❏

DIARY DATES

✆ **AIM Evolution Seminars** From now until 11th December AIM Professional is running a series of half day seminars to promote its systems. Admission is free, with a choice of morning or afternoon sessions. Call Jo Hunter on ✎ 01482 228465 for details.

✆ **3 to 5 December – Online Information '96** Exhibition at Olympia in London features some 20 publishers with online and CD-Rom products of interest to law librarians, researchers and information managers. For free tickets call ✎ 01923 233442.

✆ **10 & 11 December – Advice & Information in the Community** Conference at Warwick University looking at the use of IT as a way for local councils to deliver advice services. Fee £145 + VAT, for details call Ferret Information Systems on ✎ 01222 644660.

✆ **27 to 29 January – Legal Tech New York** The biggest legal IT conference and exhibition in the USA. At the New York Hilton, call Corporate Presentations on ✎ 001 212 877 5619 for seminar programme details.

✆ **25 & 26 February – Information Systems for Lawyers** The annual *Lawyer* conference and exhibition. Now in its 9th year, the location is the London Marriott Hotel and the twin themes this year are exploiting existing technologies and planning for the future. Admission £697 (+ VAT), call Centaur Conferences on ✎ 0171 287 5000 for details.   ❏

COMMUNIC@TIONS FUTURES

Web operators are welcome to create links to the **LTi** site at http://www.cloudnine.co.uk/cloudnine/ **LTi** is a member of the HTML Writers Guild and supports the Electronic Frontier Foundation campaign for free speech on the Internet.

BT AND MICROSOFT LINK UP TO PROMOTE ISDN ON NET

Microsoft and the soon-to-be merged BT/MCI Concert telecoms group have announced their collaboration on a number of new internet and intranet related projects, including one to encourage greater use of high speed ISDN communications technology.

From this month Microsoft will carry a *Get ISDN* facility on its Web site, so users can order ISDN electronically. At the same time Microsoft, whose Internet Explorer 3.0 browser is already supplied as a standard part of the BT internet service, has announced its relaunched Microsoft Network (MSN) online service will be available across the UK at the same low price, local call rates regardless of whether users are accessing the service at 14.4 kbps, 28.8 kbps, 33.6 kbps or via ISDN at 128 kbps.

British Telecommunications has also announced that until 31st March 1997, first time users of ISDN will be able to take advantage of a low cost BT ISDN Starter Kit to help them migrate from modem technology. The kit, which retails for £329 + VAT, includes all relevant software to access the BT Internet service and a BT Ignition ISDN terminal adapter (the ISDN equivalent of a modem).

☞ **Comment...** Coming so soon after BT announced its lower price *Start Up* option for ISDN subscribers, clearly all the stops are now being pulled out to encourage a wider take-up of ISDN. In fact both BT and Microsoft quote survey findings that suggest 34% of current UK internet ➡

➡ business users are "considering" upgrading to ISDN to get faster data transfer speeds.

But, is this all too little, too late, particularly given the advances now being made in conventional *copper wire* communications speeds?

The latest modems offer 33.6 kbps speeds, which is close to the theoretical maximum of 35 kbps for phone lines. But, as reported in previous issues, new approaches, such as the US Robotics' x2 technology, mean data can now be downloaded from an internet server at speeds of up to 56 kbps. Although uploading is still limited to 33.6 kbps, this is unlikely to matter to most users who only ever upload small amounts of data, such as "http" requests.

Clearly ISDN still has a role to play in data communications generally but if faster internet access is your only concern, forget ISDN, stick with your conventional phone line and buy one of the new ultra high speed modems. ❐

NETSCAPE PLANNING CHANGE OF EMPHASIS

In the face of increasing competition from Microsoft's Internet Explorer 3.0 browser, Netscape has announced that the next major upgrade to Navigator 4.0 will see a shift of emphasis towards the corporate groupware/intranet market, with the browser becoming just one element in a Lotus Notes-like suite of applications called Netscape Communicator.

☞ **Comment...** The new system will also see email disentangled from the core Web browser, with the result Navigator should once more become a slimmer and less computer resource hungry application, which is one reason why so many users have shifted allegiance to Microsoft's rival browser in recent weeks. Communicator is set for a first quarter 1997 launch and further details are available at http://home.netscape.com/comprod/ announce/ overview.html ❐

Novell to open up NDS

Novell (✆ 01344 724000) has changed its licensing policy for Novell Directory Services (NDS) technology to encourage its use on other platforms, including Unix and Windows NT.

☞ **In an attempt to stem the competition from Microsoft and Netscape, Novell has also released its IntranetWare Client for Windows NT 3.51 and 4.0 workstations. The company says it will provide users with a seamless internet/intranet solution. The software can be downloaded free of charge from** http://support.novell.com/home/

Fax on the internet

This week sees the UK launch of a new internet faxing system developed by US software house Infotrieve. Full details and free *client* software can be downloaded from http://www.infotrieve.com

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Alexis Byter's
COMPUTER LORE
Jarndyce revisited

So computers and do-it-yourself legal software could make lawyers redundant? Don't you believe it.

An acquaintance recently bought a D-I-Y wills drafting program to avoid the expense of having to use a solicitor. Bad move. Having spent much time and effort drawing up wills for his whole family – and getting them duly attested and witnessed – as a precaution he asked a local lawyer for a quick opinion as to their validity.

Leaving aside the fact some of the bequests created complex trusts, the lawyer felt the whole lot were invalid because they had been printed on single sheets of paper and stapled together.

Ironically all this took place during the English Law Society's *Wills Week* campaign, when most firms are happy to prepare wills for a reduced fee.

The perils of email

Electronic mail is a wonderful technology but in the wrong hands it can be about as safe as giving razor blades to monkeys.

Last week I received an email from a managing partner chivying one of his firm's suppliers over their delays in delivering some software. Fascinating stuff but the message was not meant ➡

for me and had clearly been incorrectly addressed by someone *clicking* against the wrong name in their address book.

No harm done in this case but what if it had been legal or Stock Market price sensitive information? Still, the award for Email Blunder of the Month has to go the newly privatised Stationery Office (formerly HMSO) who last week emailed staff with news that nearly half of the 950 jobs at the Norwich HQ were to be axed by Christmas. Not only was this the first staff had heard of it but unions and management were still in negotiation over the proposed redundancies.

Crestfallen

Don't laugh at the problems the English Law Society has got itself into over REGIS membership database – best known for its inability to deliver solicitors' Practising Certificates on time, despite being £7.5million over budget.

At least Chancery Lane is in good company, with various government departments, public utilities and of course the London Stock Exchange, which after the collapse of the TAURUS project is set to repeat the fiasco with its CREST paperless share trading system. As these over-ambitious projects seem doomed to fail from the outset, rather than express surprise when they do, perhaps we should be asking how anyone ever imagined they would work! ❑

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