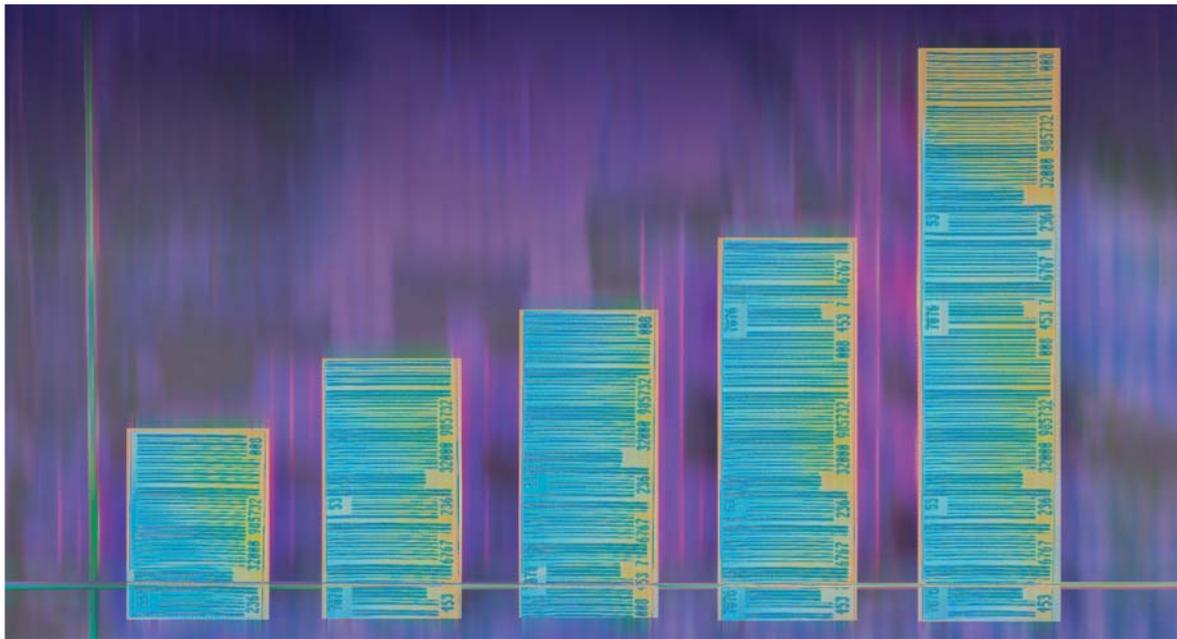


## Technology Committee

The two key functions of the Technology Committee of the Law Society of Ireland are to monitor developments in technology which are relevant to the legal profession, and to promote the use of technology as a business resource within the profession. In addition, the Committee provides assistance and advice to individual members on a one to one basis throughout the year. This article is one of a series of articles posted on the Technology Committee section of the Law Society website



## COMPUTER LITERACY HIGH AMONG SOLICITORS' FIRMS, SURVEY FINDS

Solicitors have a high rate of computer literacy, a Law Society-commissioned survey has found – but smaller firms need to catch up with the advanced computer systems used in larger firms. Among the headline findings, one-fifth of (mainly smaller) firms were found to be still managing their accounts manually, while many others have failed to embrace the opportunities posed by web marketing.

Results of the TNS mrbi survey – commissioned by the Technology Committee of the Law Society – are very positive, indicating a high rate of computer literacy among members of the profession. Over 200 solicitors' firms were surveyed. The sample was designed to be nationally representative, with quotas taking account of the regions where firms operate and their size. The questionnaire included a screening question, to ensure that the interview was conducted with the solicitor responsible for IT decisions in the firm. Fieldwork took place between 19 and 30 January 2006.

Ownership of basic IT hardware was found to be practically universal – all firms own a computer and a printer. “This is all the more interesting,” says Andrew Cody, Chairman of the Technology Committee, “when you consider that when we carried out our last survey of the profession in 1994, internet and email weren't even mentioned! Back then, the survey results revealed that approximately 75% of solicitors in Longford were using typewriters instead of computers, while in Leitrim, there were no computerised accounts.”

Now, almost four out of five firms have some form of

computer network in place and two-thirds use scanners. Similarly, almost all firms are using a basic word-processing package. Larger firms, based in Dublin, are most likely to use advanced hardware and software, such as digital dictators, PDAs and accounts management software.

### COMPUTERISED ACCOUNTS PACKAGES

It is noteworthy that, although more than four out of five firms are using some form of computerised accounts management package, one-fifth (mainly smaller firms) are still managing their accounts manually. There is no clearly dominant accounts management package on the market. “There are 35 different accounts management software packages being used by members of the profession,” says Andrew. “Solicitors and firms should be using accounts management packages that are tailored specifically for solicitors' offices. In order to find out the kind of package you should be using, you should visit the Law Society's website ([www.lawsociety.ie](http://www.lawsociety.ie)). Go to the ‘Society Committees’ page, select ‘Technology’ and click on the article ‘Accounts Packages’, written by chartered accountant and investigating accountant, Munro Moore.”

“Because eConveyancing is coming up, we wanted to know the level of IT proficiency within the profession,” says Andrew. “We carried out the survey for three reasons, mainly:

- To advise the taskforce on eConveyancing about how ready the profession is for it,



## Technology Committee

- To advise the Society in relation to communicating with its own members,
- To help when devising plans for the education of the profession on IT matters.”

### Web marketing

The survey found that internet access within law firms is virtually universal, with four out of every five (80%) using broadband. “This was far ahead of our expectations,” says the Chairman of the Technology Committee, “and shows that solicitors and firms have embraced the new technology.” (Those without broadband are more likely to be smaller firms, located outside Dublin.) Internet usage is correspondingly high among staff. Almost all assistant solicitors and support staff use the internet, including nearly nine out of ten principals/partners.

The internet tends to be used most frequently to access information from the Land Registry, the Courts Service website, the Companies Registration Office, Government bodies, the Revenue Commission and the Law Society Members’ web page. There were lower levels of access for BAILII, law searchers and the planning authorities.

E-mail is widely used by solicitors, with over nine in ten using it in the course of their business. It is most widely used to communicate with clients, (with almost two-thirds using it for this purpose on a daily basis). Almost half of solicitors use e-mail to communicate internally with colleagues every day. Again, this application is most frequently used by larger firms in the Dublin area.

Despite high levels of internet usage, only one-quarter of firms have their own website. Less than one-fifth of these, however, regard it as a useful tool for generating business. The findings have indicated that law firms will need to embrace web marketing into the future.

### Security issues

The vast majority (over nine in ten) have developed a back-up policy for their computer systems. Most of the firms (88%) that have a back-up policy use a manual back-up system. Less than one-tenth (8%) of such firms use an external company to back up their computer files – of whom the majority are the larger firms, located in the capital. The findings point to a need to improve back-up policies. “In all, 6% have absolutely no back-up policy, whether that’s disk, CD, tape or server,” says Andrew.

Almost all firms do have anti-virus software installed on their computer systems, and in four-fifths of cases, this anti-virus software is up-dated manually by staff at least once a week.

Almost one-third of legal firms allow their solicitors

remote access to their office network. Of the one-fifth of firms with external support, whether staff or typists for instance, one-quarter can provide remote access to their networks.

“Some of the findings have exceeded our expectations,” says Andrew. “In our survey, the amount of solicitors who have remote access to their office is 31%. In addition, there is almost 100% email usage, which is heartening to see. Other good news was revealed in the 73% who have upgraded some parts of their network or servers within the past year. That’s a strong uptake of people moving forward with technology.”

In addition, smaller firms must look to the example set by their larger counterparts in embracing a more sophisticated level of technology.

### Relatively advanced

It is clear that solicitors’ firms are relatively advanced in terms of embracing the digital revolution. It is obvious, also, that the foundations for further advancement are in place, given the high levels of hardware ownership. The main opportunities for growth in this area include:

- Standardising the types of accounts management packages used,
- Encouraging the use of newer technologies, and
- Placing greater emphasis on web-based resources, such as BAILII, law searchers, and e-mail contact with the Courts Service, to name a few.

The Technology Committee is now considering the survey’s results in detail with a view to formulating advice and recommendations on possible seminars and workshops to promote the use of information technology among the profession. It is also preparing recommendations for the Law Society on how best to advance its communication, using IT, with members. It will also make recommendations to the Law School on the training and use of IT internally, and will provide advice to working groups within the Society and, in particular, the task force on eConveyancing.

Says Andrew: “There has been a huge take-up of solicitors who lodge land registry deeds online. I’d like to see a cost reduction for those who do use the technology to lodge their land registry deeds.”

“One of the areas we need to work on, however, is the relatively low level of legal research that’s being carried out online. We studied the usage of 15 legal research databases and found that the take-up was significantly below our expectations. In order to encourage the use of such research databases, we are intending to provide seminars to members of the profession about how to use these databases to their professional advantage.”



## *Technology Committee*

### **DOES THE LAW SOCIETY HAVE YOUR PERSONAL BUSINESS EMAIL ADDRESS?**

The IT section in the Law Society wishes to update its email address files for members of the profession. Many members currently receive the Society's regular e-zine through their personal business email addresses – but many more are not receiving such information, either because members' email addresses are out of date, are not on the Society's records, or because members have supplied only

their generic business email addresses to the IT section.

If you would like to be kept up to date by receiving information from the Society about the profession – directly to your desk – and would like to receive the Society's e-zine, please forward your personal business email address (rather than your generic company email address) to: [customerservice@lawsociety.ie](mailto:customerservice@lawsociety.ie).

