

## **Head in the Sand or A Walk in the Clouds?**

**By**

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It is change, continuing change, inevitable change, that is the dominant factor in society today. No sensible decision can be made any longer without taking into account not only the world as it is, but the world as it will be .... This, in turn, means that our statesmen, our businessmen, our everyman must take on a science fictional way of thinking.

- Isaac Asimov (1920–92)

After a recent speaking engagement I was approached by the managing partner of a law firm who agreed that the information technology (IT) revolution has and will continue to greatly impact the practice of law. However, he said that since he was not technologically inclined and the capitalization cost for “technology” was significant that his firm was going to take a wait and see approach.

Isn't life complex? We are all called upon to play many different roles in our daily lives. Whether one is a lawyer, judge, associate, manager, father, husband, wife, son, daughter, coach, mediator, arbitrator you take on some form of a “leadership” role. Leadership roles are bestowed or sought after for a variety of reasons. Whether it be control, money or the opportunity to achieve and make a difference you have a voice in how your organization adapts to the future. However, this is a tremendous responsibility as you decide the future direction of the firm - what areas to specialize in, how to effectively and efficiently manage the firm, and whether information technology will impact your firm. You are responsible for the paychecks of a lot of people. As a leader it is essential that you pay close attention to the information technology revolution we are living through.

In terms of periods of history our recent IT revolution has moved with lightening speed. 10,000,000 years ago we were hunters and gatherers of food. 8,000 years ago we began our agricultural economy and just over 200 years ago our cities and towns transitioned to a new urban economy. Suddenly in the last several years we are speeding toward an electronic global economy fueled by computers and the Internet. Content, content, content is everywhere as we are receiving 400 times more data than that of a renaissance man.

The Internet communication village has seen explosive infiltration compared to all other communication devices. According to Cyberatlas it took the telephone 38 years to reach 10 million customers, fax 22 years, VCR's and cellular phones 9 years, and PC's 7 years. The Internet only took 3 years to garner 10,000,000 users.

This electronic global economy change is reflected in our job market where in 1900 80% of jobs were manual and 20% of jobs were cerebral. By the year 2010 80% of jobs will be cerebral and 20% of jobs will be manual. Unfortunately we will see one of the largest number of disenfranchised people in history as we transition to this new era. Some will even call for a return to Luddism which is an opposition to technological change. Luddism was named after a band of laborers, called Luddites, who in the early 1800's destroyed new textile machines to which they attributed high unemployment.

This new economy will bring many changes. Many of the traditional methods of communication will be displaced. More and more our time will be spent sending, receiving and working in real-time with text, sound, graphics and video. Legal and non-legal research materials will be drastically reduced in price. Jurisdictional issues as to licensure of attorneys and where a cause of action resides will increase. Travel costs will decrease as “group computing” provides the platform for a virtual firm to thrive. We will spend more time in locations that provide our Internet connection needs which can be at home, branch multimedia offices or anywhere where you can be linked to your workgroup. Support staff will decrease as a variety of technology such as voice recognition becomes a reality. The Internet will continue to add users and businesses at phenomenal rates. Solos and small firms will associate through WWW sites with other firms nationally and internationally in specific practice areas. We will become more interdependent and more human relationships will be created as the world comes to our doorstep. This interdependence will continue to grow through the exponential use of communications devices. We will have smart money cards, smart homes, smart. . .

Communications will astound us as cable, satellite and telephone companies continue to increase our ability to communicate with each other.

As we transition into this new era understand that our profession is steeped in tradition and we will experience a denial and a deep nostalgia for what we are losing as we resist the new. For lawyers our tools of the trade have stayed static for over 1400 hundred years ever since the invention of the quill pen in 600 AD. and books in 868 AD. The new tool - the computer - will seem alien, cold and impossible to operate.

However, we cannot go backwards, we cannot stand still, we must adapt to this new evolutionary process. We can teach our ourselves to adapt to these new changes. It is a tough assignment but as a leader one that you must accept. The key will be to not fight the future but embrace it. Leaders must be willing to confront the anxieties of their time - in this case the IT revolution - and leave behind a situation that common sense can continue.

The challenge facing the sole practitioner as well as the large firm will be whether they will take a wait and see or head in the sand approach and hope the IT revolution will not effect them. Or whether, in the face of overwhelming evidence, take a ‘walk in the clouds” and secure your future and your firm’s future. Always remember though that as you begin or continue your walk to:

“Be alert to the siren song of nostalgia; be patient with the missteps of transition; tread lightly; imagine the possibilities; look around; think ahead.”

- Jennifer James