

The Evolution of Taking a Memo

Digital dictation and voice-recognition technology ease the workload.

By Vickie Hanson

Dictation has been part of the legal landscape since the first attorney uttered the words, “Miss Jones, please take a memo.”

Of course, technology has changed over the years to make dictation and transcription faster and easier—from steno pads and Underwood typewriters to personal computers, and now to the Internet.

In the recent past, the only technology available for dictation has been analog tape recorders. The process is simple: Attorneys dic-

Technology A Special Report

tate into a handheld or desktop device, remove the minicassette, and deliver the tape for transcription. Increasingly, however, law firms are exploring digital technology—and are seeking information about the benefits it can provide through streamlined work flow and enhanced productivity.

After all, the trend toward digital technology within the legal profession mimics what is going on in virtually all other areas of life. We use digital technology without thinking too much about it, from CDs to DVDs to digital cameras. Familiarity with this technology—coupled with increased sensitivity to security and confidentiality—is prompting attorneys to accept digital as a better way to record, share, and archive documents. The dictation process remains exactly the same; only the technology has changed.

To make the best decision about whether digital dictation is right for their firm, however, attorneys must first have an understanding of how this new technology works and how it can benefit them.

When it came onto the scene, analog technology provided attorneys with a great deal of mobility—handheld recorders allowed them to complete dictation from their office, in court, or off site at a deposition or conference. When finished, however, they were faced with the challenge of getting the cassette to their assistant or transcriptionist. In

the office, they could simply hand the tape over or send it through intra-office mail. From remote locations, however, they had to use a courier or rely on the postal service. Once the transcriptionist received the tape, he would listen to the dictation—starting and stopping, or having to fast-forward and rewind, to decipher every word.

Similarly, digital technology relies upon handheld recorders for dictation. But the dictation is not stored on a tape that must be handed off. Instead, files are stored in digital format on a small secure digital (or media) card similar to the ones used in cameras. The attorney can either remove the card and hand it off for transcription or simply plug the recorder into a PC or docking station, and the voice file is automatically downloaded to an assistant or a transcriptionist. From there the file is transcribed and returned, either through e-mail or hard copy, to the attorney for review or modification.

Automatic download removes any possibility that the file could be lost, damaged, or destroyed in transit, and eliminates the delay between the time the dictation is completed and the time a transcriptionist can begin work. Digital files also allow the attorney to more easily locate a position within the file to insert or delete information, rather than being restricted to adding comments only at the end of the tape. Inserting additional comments into a digital file does not overwrite the dictation.

Likewise, transcriptionists can easily see which jobs are marked as priority so they can be transcribed first. Simply put, it frees up time for other tasks. This, in turn, may allow firms to reduce the size of their transcription pool and offers the option of using outsourced transcription services anywhere in the world.

Some attorneys, particularly those just entering the profession, rely upon other types of advanced technology and complete shorter dictation themselves—typing brief documents directly into a laptop or BlackBerry, for instance, and e-mailing the file to an assistant for processing. Digital technology, however, allows them to conveniently record and transfer longer files, such as proceedings from a conference or a meeting with opposing counsel.

ADVANTAGES OF DIGITAL DICTATION

Digital dictation systems offer many benefits over analog systems:

- Attorneys no longer must deal with the inherent limitations of cassette tapes. There is no need to carry blank tapes and scram-

ble to get tapes delivered to support staff. Digital recorders give attorneys the flexibility and freedom to dictate on the go, simply downloading files for transcription at their convenience.

- Digital technology presents a number of work-flow-management options not possible with tapes. Users can more easily locate certain files because they don't have to rewind and fast-forward the tape. Inserting comments is easier because insertions don't overwrite existing dictation. Plus, jobs can be easily prioritized, and special instructions or keywords can be added.

- Digital technology facilitates the quick, secure download of files from the recorder to a desktop computer, the firm's network, or the Internet. This eliminates the cost of delivery services and eliminates the risk of damaged, erased, or lost tapes.

- Administrative assistants and transcriptionists can have dictation downloaded directly onto their computers. They are automatically notified that a new job has arrived for transcription, and can better manage their work flow because they can see all pending jobs and their current status. An on-screen "player" allows transcriptionists to use their PC as a transcription tool. This means they no longer have to alternate between analog equipment and their workstation but can instead move easily between tasks with fewer interruptions to work flow.

- Dictation and transcription software allows both attorney and transcriptionist to track a job's progress. An attorney can designate priority jobs so they will be transcribed first. Files can be identified by author name, date, client name, or other data, making them easy to identify and track.

- Most digital recorders are ergonomically designed to be easier to use. Small and lightweight, most units accommodate single-handed recording and eliminate the need to press multiple buttons for recording functions (fast-forward, play, or record, for example). Screens clearly display record and playback functions and guide users through advanced operations such as inserting dictation or spoken instructions, using keywords to automatically identify files, and prioritizing individual files.

- Clearer sound quality improves productivity and turnaround time while increasing the accuracy of the transcription.

- Some digital recorders offer bar-code scanners and voice-command functionality. These features allow an attorney to automatically incorporate demographic information, such as client I.D. or the document work type, into the file. In addition to improving accuracy and enhancing security, these features also make it easier to identify and retrieve files.

- Digital technology allows users to append supporting documents to the original dictation. For example, an attorney can attach specific e-mails or correspondence that may have been referenced during a conference with opposing counsel.

- Encryption allows law firms and individual users to restrict access to files, so dictation is secure no matter where it is recorded or transmitted.

ABOUT VOICE RECOGNITION

One of the features available with digital dictation technology is voice recognition. A new technology that has not yet gained widespread adoption, voice recognition nonetheless can offer many advantages. Before making a decision about whether to incorporate voice recognition with their dictation system, however, attor-

neys need to understand precisely what the technology does and does not offer.

To begin with, it is important to understand the differences between voice processing and voice recognition.

Most systems today rely upon voice processing: A file is recorded and a transcriptionist listens to the dictation, transcribes it, and processes it for final file disposition (faxing, e-mailing, or archiving). Voice recognition, on the other hand, converts the spoken word directly into written text. No longer must a transcriptionist key in every word. Instead, a transcriptionist serves as an "editor" and simply reviews the transcription while listening to the dictation to catch inadvertent errors.

Although digital technology does not require the use of voice recognition, the new digital technology allows it to be added easily. In fact, some digital systems use the industry-standard .DSS voice file format, which automatically renders digital dictation files "voice-recognition-ready" so users can add this functionality at any time.

For some firms, the transition from traditional tape to digital dictation will be a gradual process. These firms may allow older technology to coexist as they bring digital systems online incrementally—perhaps using their current analog system until replacements are needed, prompting the transition to digital systems. This may be an option of particular interest to firms that have recently invested in upgrading their analog system, or to those whose senior partners are more comfortable with traditional approaches.

In this situation, however, it is important to keep in mind that some manufacturers are beginning to discontinue analog recorders and tapes. These products may no longer be available in the near future.

Alternatively, some firms choose to upgrade to digital all at once. This ensures smooth implementation and streamlines work flow, as all users adapt to the new approach at one time. Most firms have found the transition easy, because digital technology is intuitive and requires virtually no training. Plus, although digital technology is inherently affordable, an across-the-board upgrade offers the firm additional bargaining power with vendors.

In short, digital dictation has become the clear choice for a growing number of law firms—not only because of the enhanced sound quality but also because of the efficiencies gained in personal productivity and business operations. Starter kits with one digital recorder are available for purchase by small firms, and integrated systems can be installed for large firms. It does not necessarily require a high-dollar commitment to get started with digital dictation.

Plus, digital technology can inherently accommodate the next generation of dictation systems. For instance, some current models are "technology-ready" to incorporate optional features such as bar-code scanners, voice commands, and voice recognition. This gives law firms the opportunity to optimize efficiency today, while retaining the flexibility necessary to take advantage of tomorrow's innovations.

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