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Geeks in Paradise

—or—

My Off-the-Bench Life as a Member of the ABA Techshow Planning Board

By Hon. Herbert Dixon

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I am anxiously awaiting ABA TECHSHOW® 2008¹ for two reasons. First, Techshow is a technology conference that I enjoy immensely. Second, but more important to me, Techshow 2008 will be my first Techshow production as a member of the Techshow Planning Board. Everyone who has been associated with this wonderful conference tells me that I am the first judicial member of the Techshow Planning Board. I do not know if my presence on the planning board is even remotely responsible for the synergy that I have found among the board members; however, the process and the people involved in planning Techshow and my participation in this conference have left indelible impressions on me.

My fellow planning board members have impressive technical backgrounds. Some of them are capable of walking into a wireless café, doing their thing, and leaving with a lot of personal information obtained from the computers of other persons at the café who were surfing the Web or checking e-mail—not that any of my fellow board members would ever do anything of the sort. That type of technical capability is far beyond my knowledge.

If you were to attend a social gathering of the Techshow Planning Board, you would first see a group of regular looking people, except that one of us is likely to be wearing a T-shirt that proclaims: “No, I will not fix your computer.” Moreover, when the conversations among us start, you would likely hear endless discussions about technology, e.g., comparisons of the PC versus the Mac, a new Google feature for mobile devices, a unique court decision concerning electronic discovery, or a recent software application for doing cool things that is available as a free download. Consider the following true occurrence. At a recent breakfast gathering of planning board members before the start of a planning meeting, one of our members waxed and waned about the amount of time the evening before that she or he (I'm being deliberately vague here) had spent pondering the differences between Microsoft Windows XP and Vista. I enjoy my

fellow board members. They would be my friends even if we had met under different circumstances. After this description of us, however, some would say we need to “get a life,” and others would likely describe us as “geeks in paradise.”

Techshow is a spectacular legal technology conference. It offers educational sessions for the advanced IT participant as well as the novice. Techshow is now an annual conference held in Chicago sponsored by the Law Practice Management Section of the ABA, but it did not start that way. Techshow started as a road show by the Economics of Law Practice Section of the ABA, the forerunner of the Law Practice Management Section. The road show was initially billed as a “technology evaluation and learning event,” sometimes held twice a year in different cities. After a few changes in the name of the event, it finally became ABA TECHSHOW®.

The process of planning the next year’s Techshow starts the day after the conference with an evaluation of the event just completed, specifically, what went right and what went wrong. As a faculty participant, but not a planning board member, I thought that just about everything had gone perfectly. Boy, are these people hard on themselves! They discussed the performance of the speakers and their ability to work together to make an effective presentation. They also discussed whether there was any glitch in the audio or video, whether the signage was sufficient to direct attendees from one location to another, whether the speakers made themselves available to the conference attendees, whether the complimentary internet service provided to the attendees was of sufficient speed and quality, etc. Within two months after that initial assessment of its last production the board undertook a review of the compiled version of speaker and conference evaluations that participants submitted during the conference. I do not think that a perfect score from every participant is a realistic goal, but that does not stop the planning board from trying to achieve such a result. Leading up to the next Techshow production, the planning board members will participate in several in-person meetings; exchange thousands of e-mails; make hundreds of visits to an online collaboration Web site (Sharepoint) to review and revise documents, make suggestions, and post new thoughts and ideas; and conduct numerous telephone conferences. These folks are truly dedicated.

The next step, after tons of e-mail, several telephone conferences, and many visits to the Sharepoint Web site, is proposal of educational sessions for the next Techshow, including session descriptions. This starts the process internally referred to as filling-in the grid (the hour-by-hour visual layout of the entire Techshow conference program and activity schedule). Later, after more e-mail exchanges, telephone conferences, and Sharepoint site visits, the board meets to propose and select speakers. It is no wonder that Techshow has so many outstanding speakers. The process to select them is nothing less than amazing. In addition, there is an ongoing process to identify and select the next keynote speaker for Techshow. I will not dwell on that topic, but be advised that it is a process as demanding as the speaker selection process for the educational sessions.

The speaker selection process is thorough and intense. It starts with a review of speaker evaluations from previous Techshows. The board has a history of trying to

reinvite the top 10 speakers from the previous year, but not to speak on the same topic. The board also has a further history of trying to invite at least one-third new speakers to avoid having the same speakers every year speaking on the same topic. Before inviting a new speaker, a substantial amount of due diligence is undertaken to learn about their speaking ability, effectiveness, and reputation in the legal-technology community. I would describe the final speaker selection process as being similar to writing and enacting legislation except for the fact that Techshow is always an excellent product. It lives up to its unofficial tagline as “The World’s Premier Legal Technology Conference and Expo.”

After speaker selection is completed, the process starts for the planning board to manage the speakers’ preparation of written and visual presentations for the conference, select the souvenirs to be given to each attendee, and handle the myriad of other unimaginable details that must be addressed each year to accomplish the Techshow conference and vendor exposition.

Techshow 2008 will offer numerous educational tracks, including, Litigation Advanced IT/Security, E-Discovery, Microsoft Office, Mobile Technology, and new “Mac,” “Paperless Office” and “Going Green” tracks. There will be tracks for Solo and Small Firms, and Large Firm and Corporate Counsel. What I have found fascinating about this wealth of educational presentations is the opportunity to interact with and hear from real world experts who are involved in cutting edge legal-technology issues in state and Federal courts around the country. Also, I have the opportunity to learn ways to improve personal skills using various computer applications and other technology. Techshow presents significant learning opportunities for the bench and bar, IT specialists, and law firm and court administrators.

Techshow has been referred to as the “*Consumer Reports* of Technology Conferences” because a condition of speaking at Techshow is that speakers may not sell from the podium. Techshow attendees have come to expect neutral advice and unbiased and independent information to help determine which legal technology products and services are the best for them. Moreover, there is an additional benefit to attendees that Techshow speakers, identified by ribbons, make themselves available to attendees throughout the conference. Often the Techshow Concierge Booth is overflowing with some of the top legal-technology talent in the country; they are encouraged to be there so that you can ask that clarifying question or pose those questions that were not addressed during the educational session. To some attendees these opportunities alone have been worth the price of admission. Speaker accessibility is a cherished hallmark of ABA Techshow.

If Techshow has a fault, it is that too many wonderful legal technology programs are offered at conflicting times. At all times during the educational program time slots, there are at least five simultaneous educational sessions and a roundtable discussion in progress for the same time interval. This results in hundreds of attendees having a personal desire to attend two or more of these simultaneous programs, which is physically impossible. And what is worse for the attendee is that no educational session is

repeated; each is offered only once. I have urged the planning board to change this single offering philosophy, so far without success. I may try again to urge such a change next year, but you are stuck with that scheduling philosophy for now. Even as a Techshow planning board member, I also am a victim of these conflicts. There are other Techshow educational sessions that I would like to attend, but they are offered at the same time that I am making a presentation or monitoring another educational sessions for which I am the track leader. Nevertheless, a saving grace to this predicament is that each attendee receives a CD of the papers prepared for each educational session. In addition, the visual presentation materials for each of these sessions will be posted on the Techshow Web site for attendees to download at a later time. Another saving grace is that an educational session similar to the sessions that you missed might be offered next year. If that is the case, you can choose to attend that session at next year's Techshow.

Techshow has even found a way to include technology in the social events. A standard feature of Techshow is "Taste of ABA Techshow," opportunities for evening dining with Techshow speakers to discuss specific and other legal technology topics. Techshow 2008 will feature "Techshow After Dark," a social gala in the hotel's Grand Ballroom with a live band and heavy appetizers to mix and mingle with the Techshow vendors and speakers. Finally, Chicago's internationally acclaimed St. Patrick's Day Parade will occur on the concluding day of Techshow 2008 and pass very nearby the conference hotel.

The final reason I attend Techshow is that I do not like the idea of the attorneys knowing more about the technology than me, and the knowledge that I gain at Techshow gives me that additional edge. Techshow is filled with practical and educational content, and that content offers significant benefit to the bench and bar. It is nearly universally accepted that proper use of technology results in faster and more efficient trials and enhanced jury comprehension and memory of the evidence and understanding of the parties' positions. Techshow provides the members of the bench and the bar with numerous opportunities to enhance their knowledge of legal technology issues and development of personal skills to make use of technology. Colleagues, I hope to see you at Techshow.

¹ ABA TECHSHOW® 2008 is scheduled for March 13–15, 2008, at the Hilton Chicago. Further information regarding TECHSHOW is online at www.techshow.com.