

Technology Use in Solo and Small Firm Practice (2001)

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Introduction

The American Bar Association Legal Technology Resource Center surveyed a random selection of attorneys in private practice for its 2001 Legal Technology Survey Report. The survey respondents came from a mixture of firm backgrounds and sizes across the country. Of the 671 respondents, 25.3% were solo practitioners; 40.3% worked in a small firm, specifically, 28.6% in firms comprised of 2-5 attorneys and 11.7% in firms with 6-10 attorneys. For this report, small firms have been divided into two categories: group A (2-5 attorneys) and group B (6-10 attorneys). The survey covered five distinct technology areas: Law Office Technology, Litigation and Courtroom Technology, Web and Communication Technology, Online Research, and Mobile Lawyers. The following information highlights technology use in solo and small firm practice, with particular emphasis on hardware, software, and the Internet.

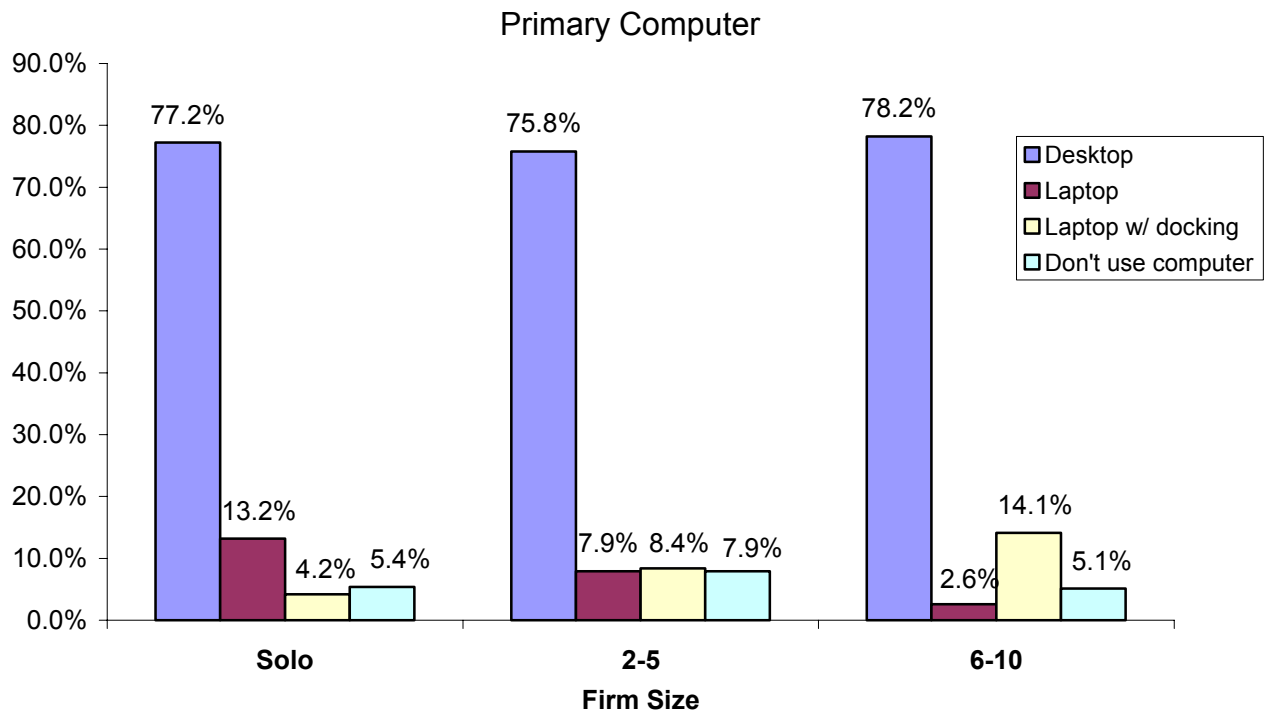
I. Hardware

Computers

Desktop models are the most popular choice for solo and small firm attorneys, with 91.6% of solo practitioners, 93.1% of group A firms, and 88.0% of group B firms. Laptops, in contrast, do not enjoy the same level of ownership. Only 58.4% of solo attorneys, 60.1% of group A firms, and 59.5% of group B firms own laptops.

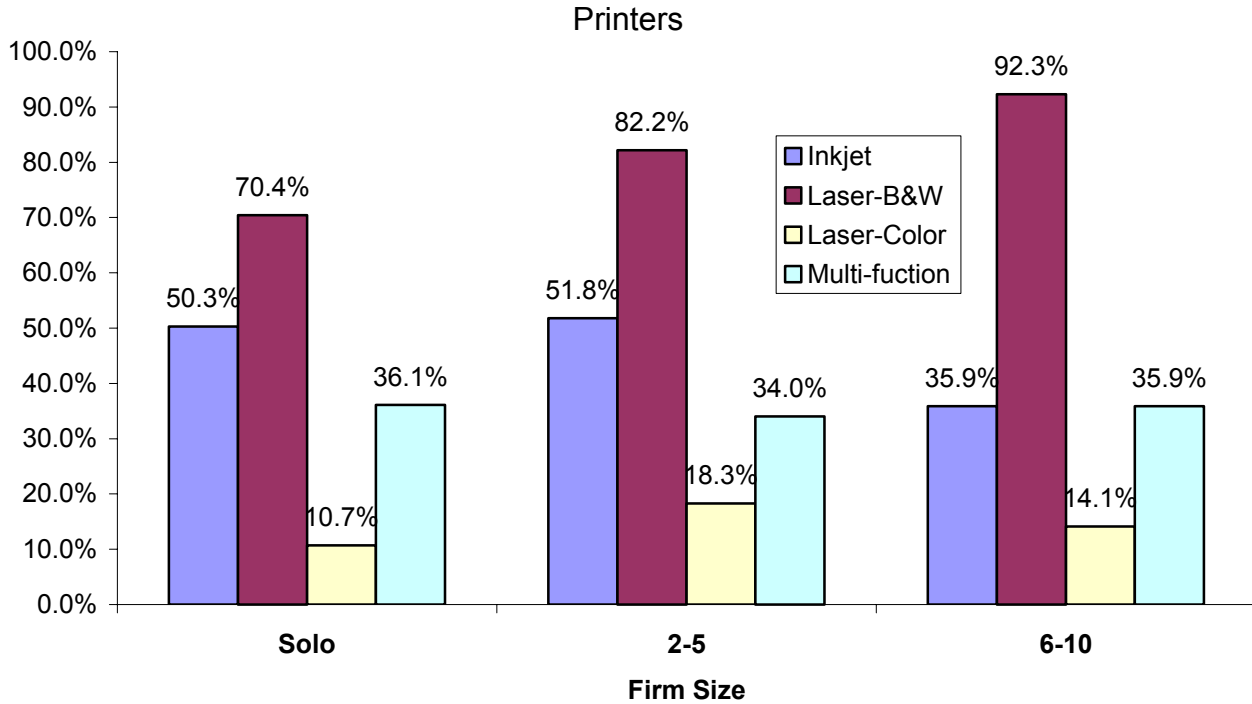
While attorneys in all three groups may own both desktops and laptops, they overwhelmingly choose the desktop model as their primary workstation.

Like computers, cell phones have become necessary for attorneys in both solo and small firm practice (solo: 72.8%; group A: 81.2%; group B: 74.4%). However, personal digital assistants (PDA's) have not, used by slightly less than one third of the attorneys surveyed (solo: 23.1%; group A: 29.3%; group B: 32.1%).

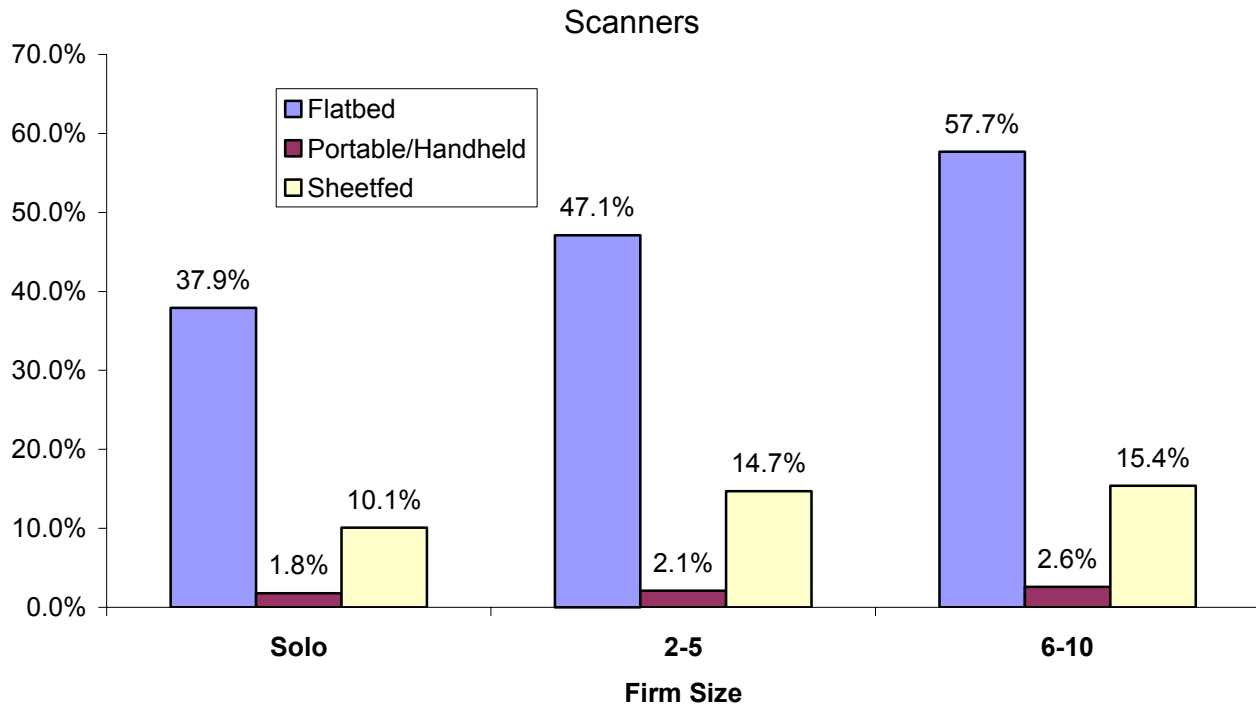


Printers and Scanners

Of the four office printing options available, attorneys in solo and small practice prefer black and white laser printers to inkjet, multi-function, color and portable models.



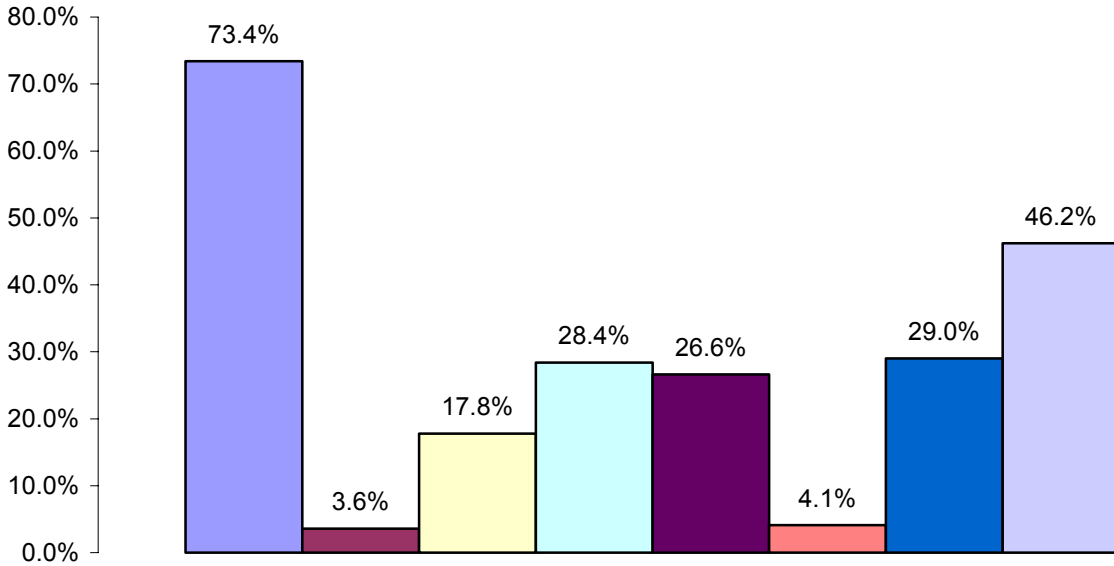
Unlike printers, scanners are not as much of an office necessity, particularly in firms with less than 6 attorneys. In all three groups, the most prevalent type of scanner was the flatbed model, with significantly fewer firms using either sheetfed or portable models.



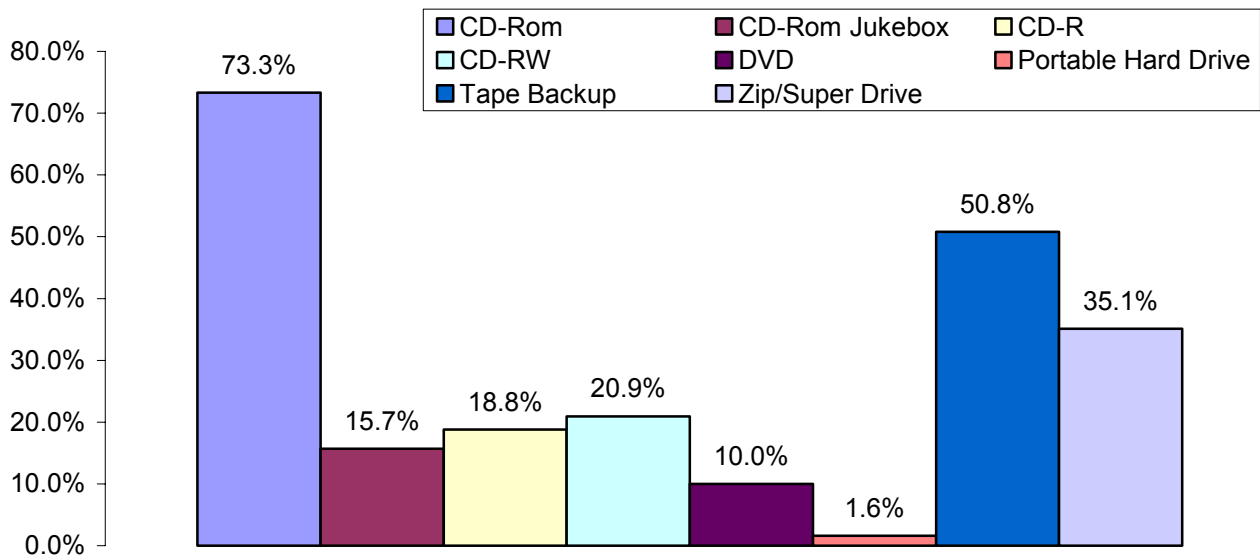
Storage

In the storage arena, CD-ROMs are the overall favorite for both solo and small firm practitioners. Newer hardware, like CD-R's and CD-RW's are gradually gaining acceptance in both groups as well.

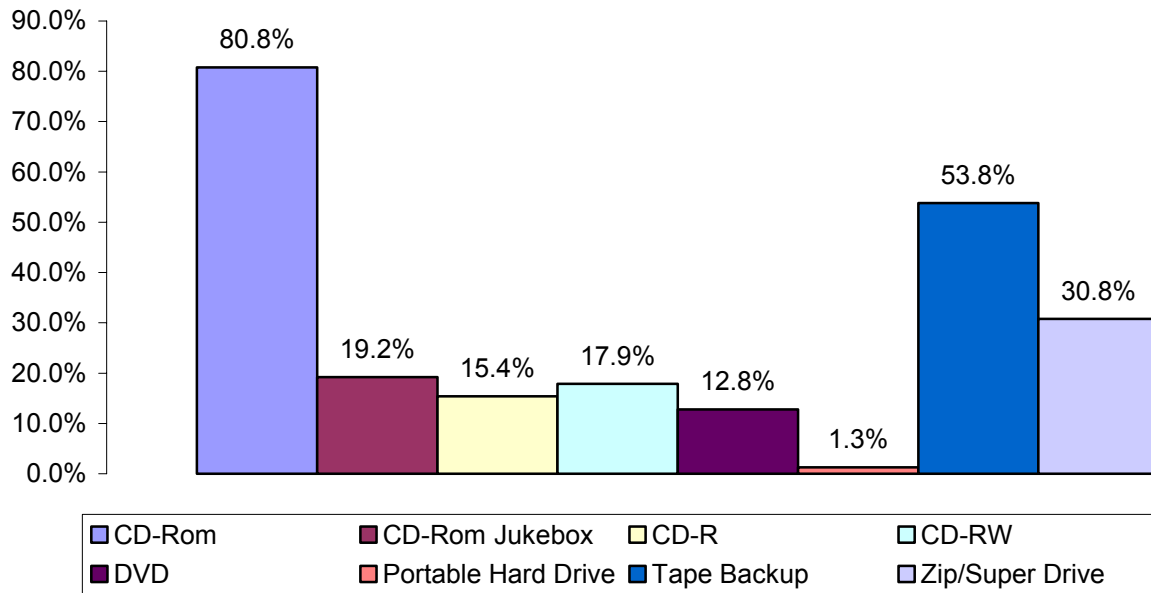
Firm Size: Solo



Firm Size: 2-5



Firm Size: 6-10



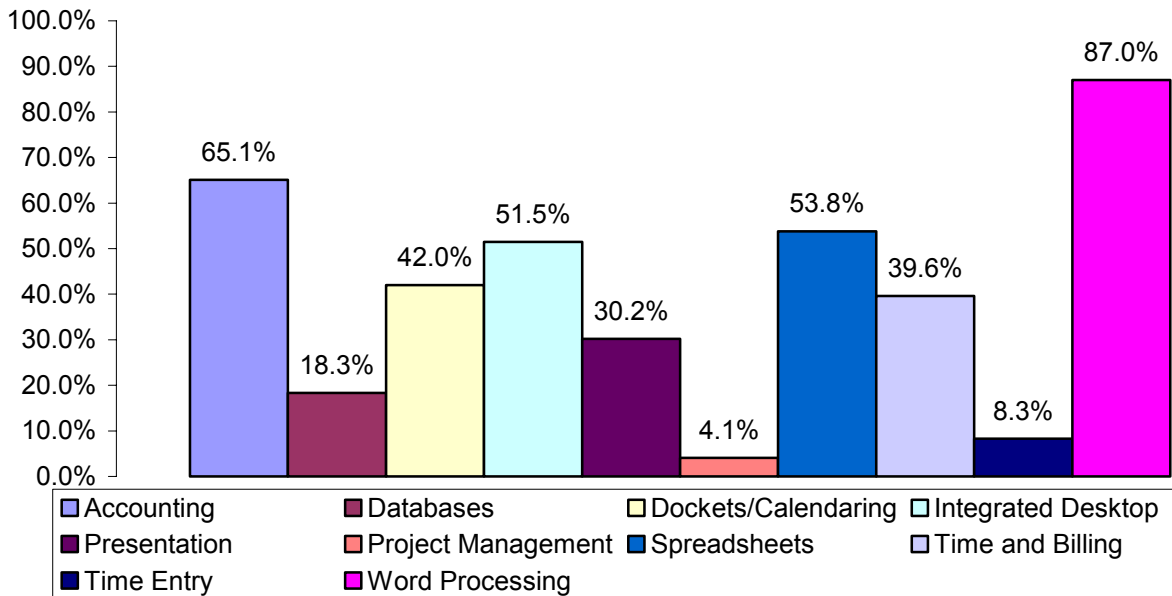
Portable hard drives have yet to establish a significant presence in either group.

II. Software

General Office

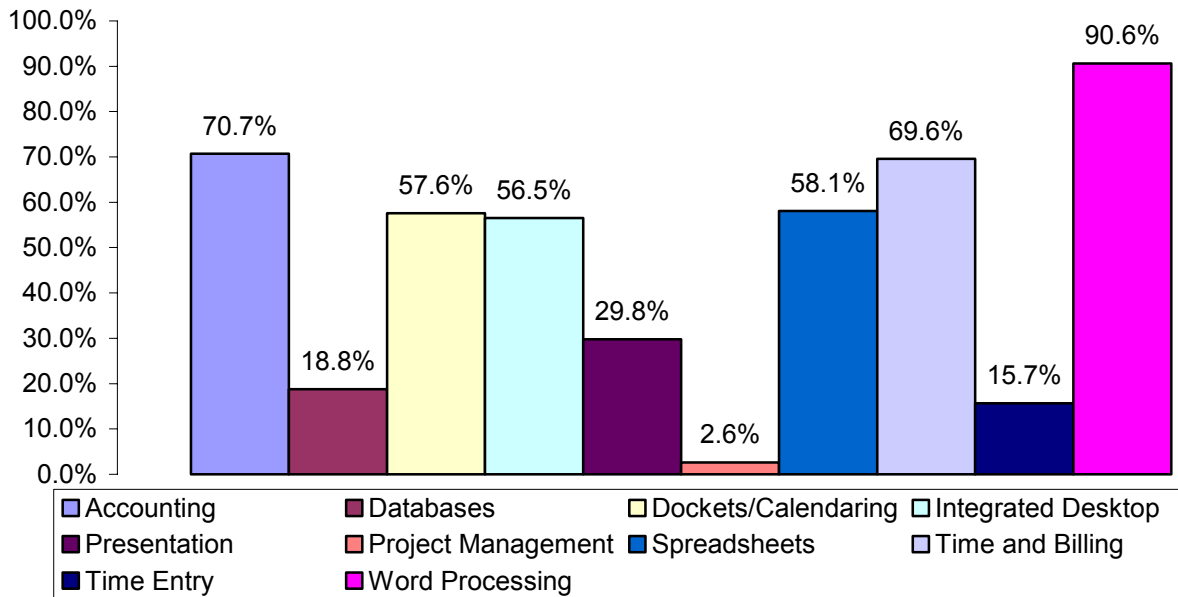
A survey of general office software yields few surprises. As expected, an overwhelming majority of both solo and small firm attorneys use a word processing program (solo: 87.0%, group A: 90.6%; group B: 93.6%). MS Word is the most popular program, with Word Perfect a close second.

Firm Size: Solo

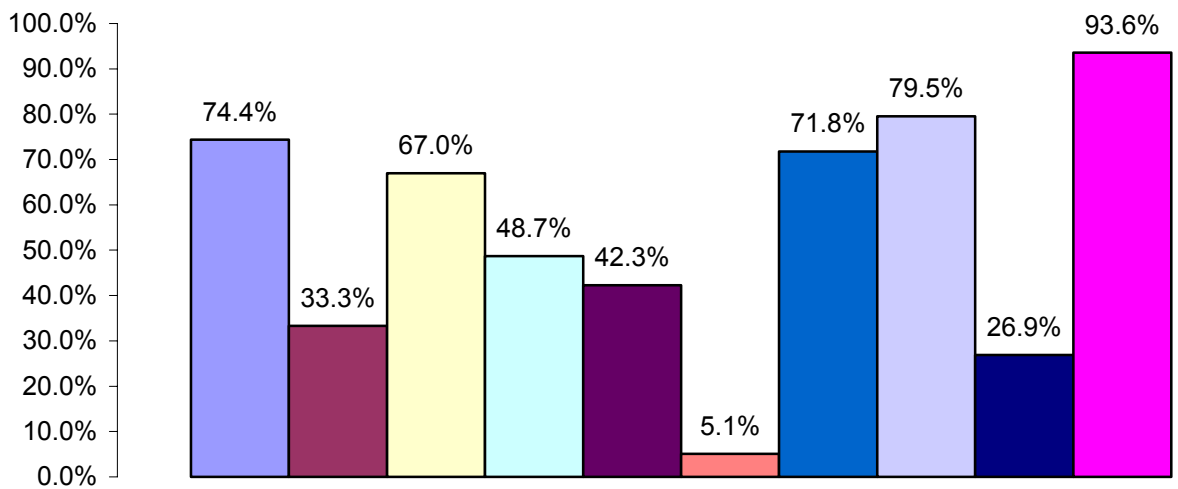


Also popular for general office software are accounting programs (solo: 65.1%; group A: 70.7%; group B: 74.4%). Though not quite as popular, both solo and small firms use spreadsheets (solo: 53.8%; group A: 58.1%; group B: 71.8%). And predictably, Time and Billing software, while popular with small firms is not as common in solo offices (solo: 39.6%; group A: 69.6%; group B: 79.5%).

Firm Size: 2-5

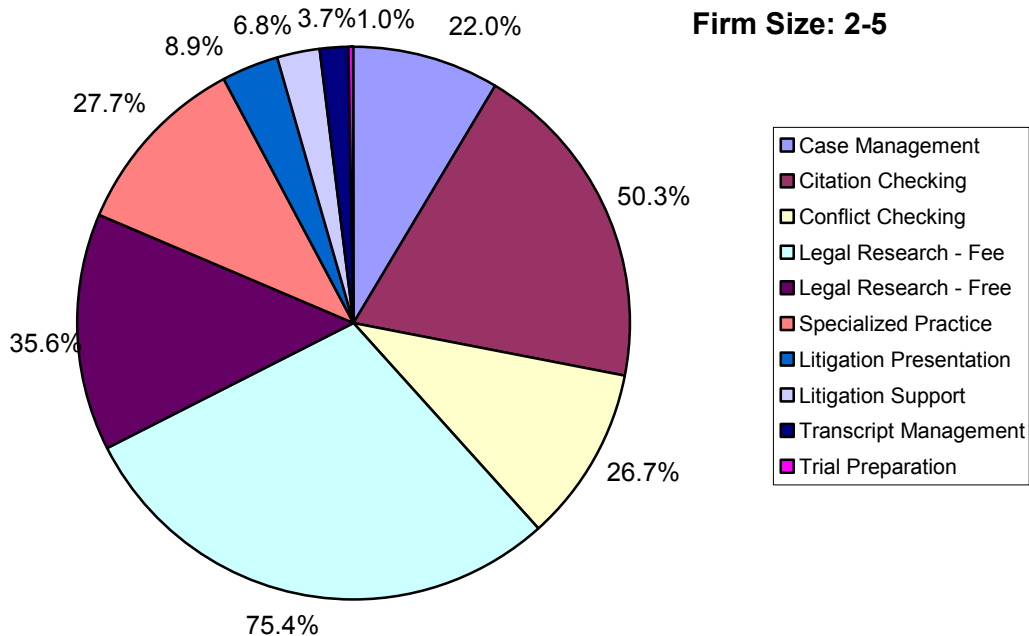
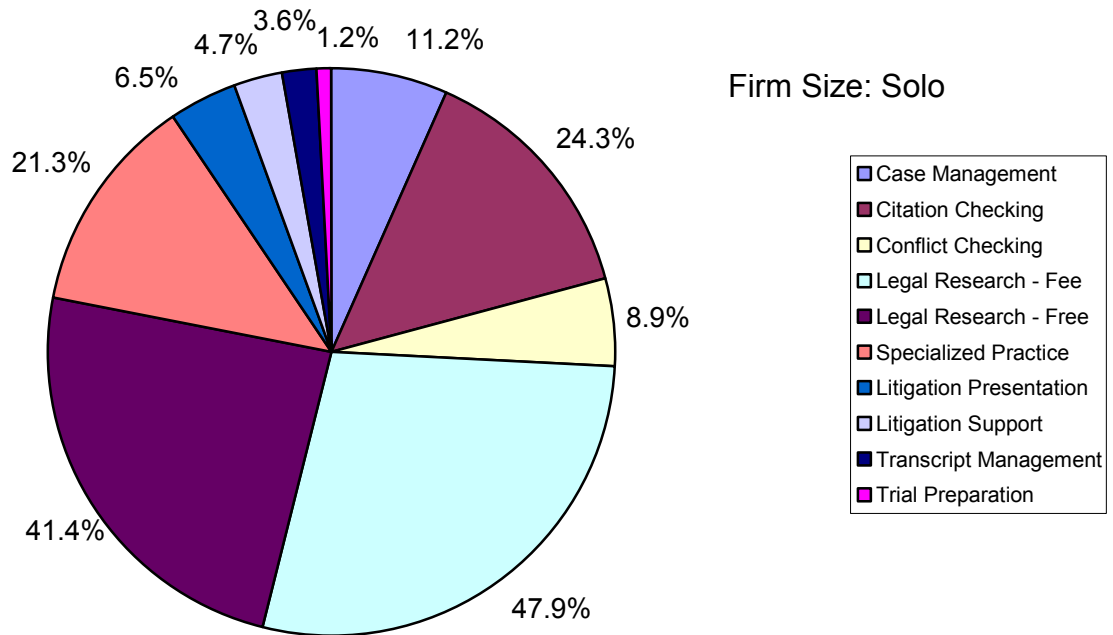


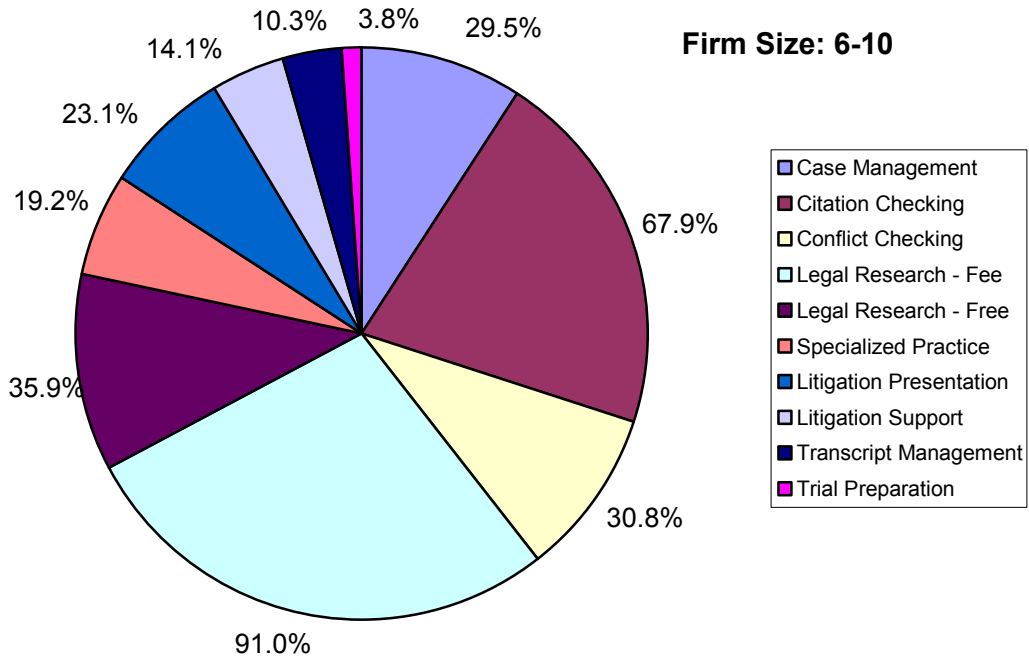
Firm Size: 6-10



Legal

Software created specifically for the legal profession is less popular than general office software. However, both versions of Legal Research software (free and fee-based) are popular in both solo and small firms, while Citation Checking software enjoys more popularity with attorneys in small firms.

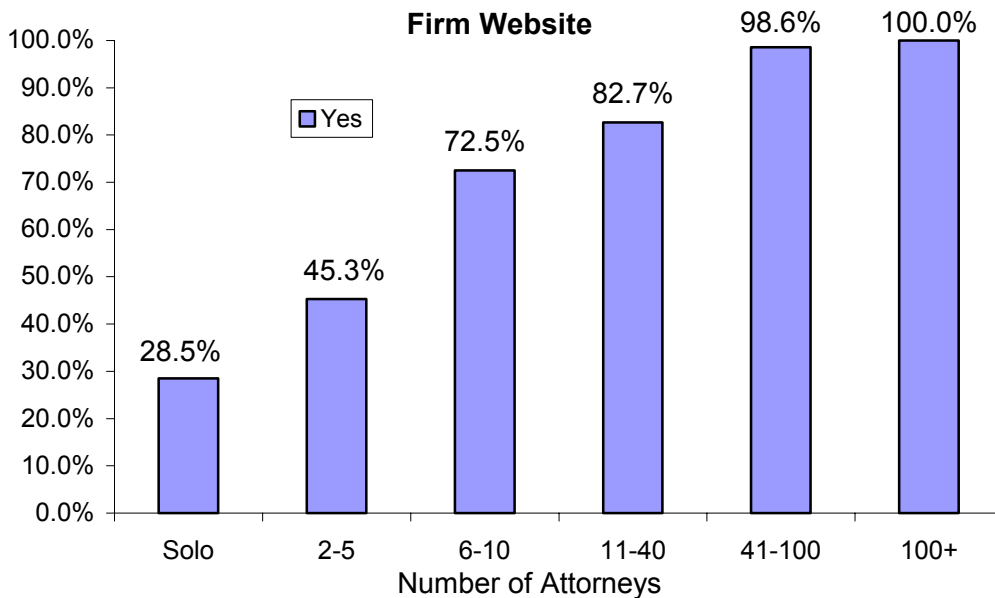




III. Working Online

Web

While more firms are developing a presence on the web, this trend has not caught on as quickly within the solo and small firm arena.



For those solo and small practice firms that do have a website, the preferred hosting model is the use of a third party (solo: 70.8%; group A: 59.3%; group B: 40.4%). A significantly smaller percentage hosts their own website (solo: 12.5%; group A: 12.3%; group B: 21.1%).

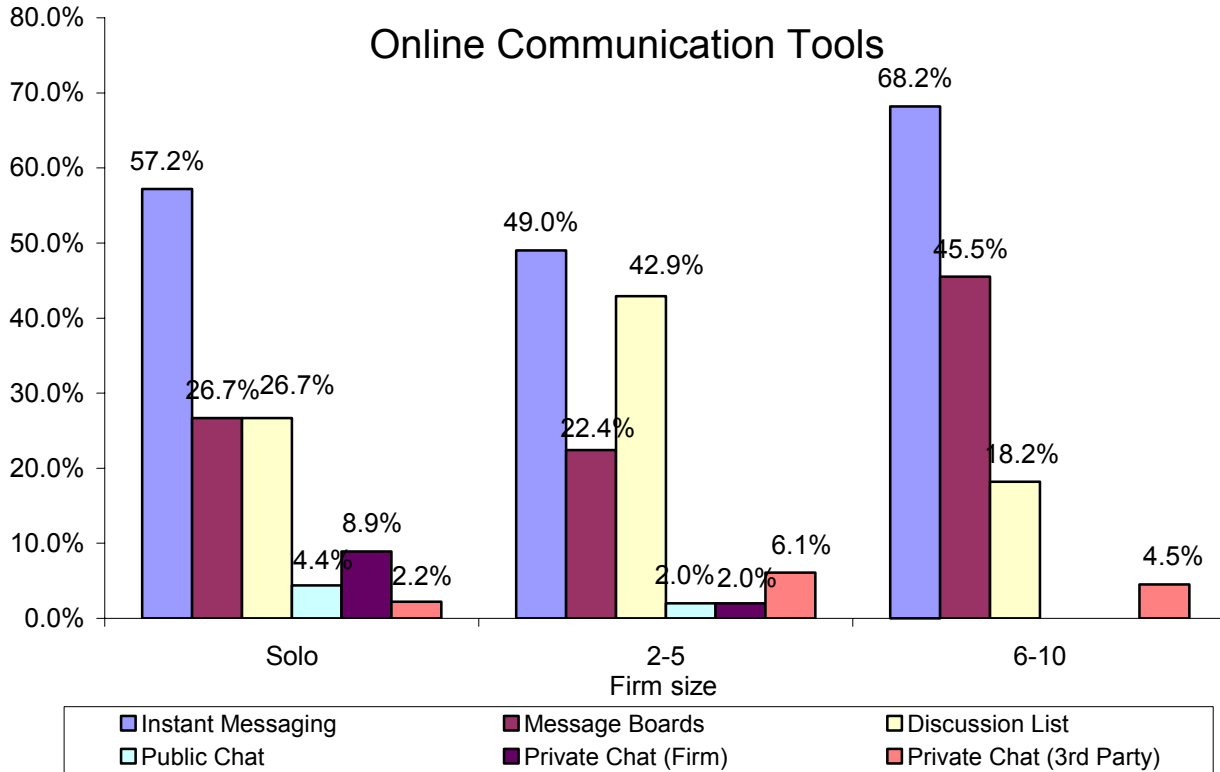
When it comes to domain names, the overwhelming preference for attorneys in both solo and small firm practice is to use the name of the law firm or some variation (solo: 71.4%; group A: 92.7%, group B: 88.9%). A generic domain name is more common with solo practitioners (32.1%) as compared to firms with 2-5 attorneys (11.9%) and firms with 6-10 attorneys (4.9%).

Web browsers are quite common in all three groups (solo: 71.6%; group A: 78.5%; group B: 92.3%). However, website design/development tools and website management tools are not. Only 11.8% of solo practitioners and 12.6% of attorneys in group A use website design/development software. Roughly one-quarter (25.6%) of attorneys in group B use such software. For website management, usage is even less (solo: 8.3%; group A: 5.8%; group B: 10.3%).

Communications

As expected, e-mail enjoys significant popularity within the legal profession (solo: 79.3%; group A: 80.6%; group B: 96.2%).

In addition to e-mail, solo and small firm attorneys are taking advantage of other online communication tools for work-related issues, including e-mail discussion lists, web-based message boards, instant messaging, and online chat rooms/conference areas.



Conclusion

The results of the 2001 Technology Survey Report indicate that solo and small firm attorneys use technology for both general office and legal-specific tasks. Moreover, they are gradually incorporating newer technology, though not as rapidly as larger firms. Whether this is the result of budget constraints or simply lack of need is unclear. It is clear from the survey, though, that attorneys in all firm sizes have many technology options available to them.

About the Legal Technology Resource Center

The Legal Technology Resource Center (LTRC) is the legal profession's most comprehensive repository of technology information and resources. Staffed by a five-member team of lawyers and librarians, the Center remains at the forefront of emerging technology issues and trends that impact the legal community and has performed in-depth analysis and research on such subjects since the 1990s.

For more information about the survey or other LTRC services, please call (312) 988-5465 or email ltrc@abanet.org. Additional information is also available on the web at www.lawtechnology.org.