

Technology Use in Solo and Small Firm Practice (2002)

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Introduction

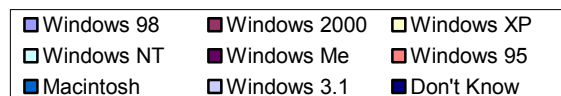
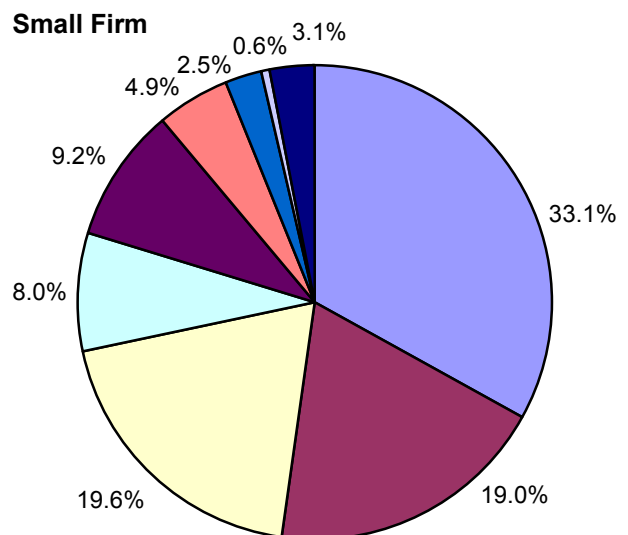
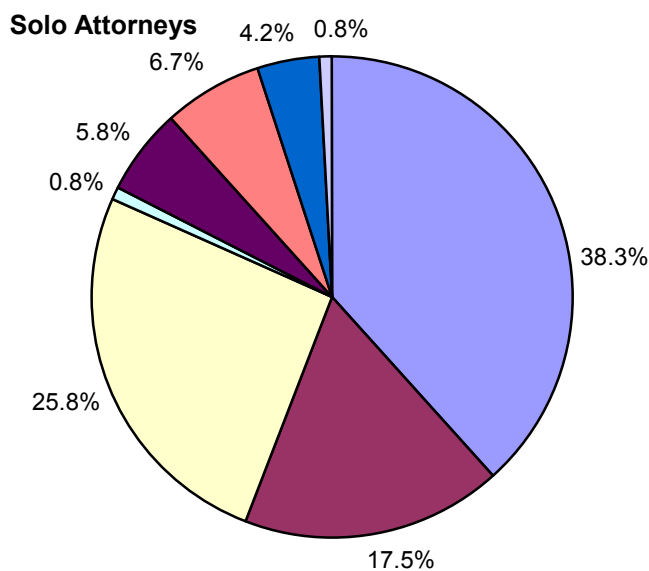
The American Bar Association Legal Technology Resource Center surveyed a random selection of attorneys in private practice for its 2002 Legal Technology Survey Report. The survey respondents came from a mixture of firm backgrounds and sizes across the country. Of the 3,091 respondents, 24.8% were solo practitioners; 35.4% worked in a small firm, defined for this report, as having 2-9 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

It should come as no surprise that the vast majority of attorneys use a computer at work, specifically, 93.8% of solo practitioners and 98.8% of small firm attorneys. The primary model of choice is the desktop in 79.2% of solo practices and 83.6% in small firms. By comparison, only half of the attorneys surveyed in either group use a notebook model for their computing needs (solo: 50.8%; small firm: 53.0%), but this computer is not used as the main workstation.

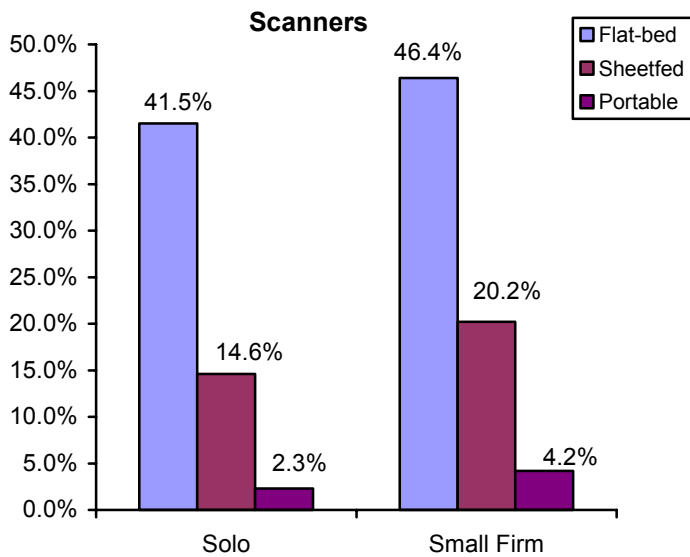
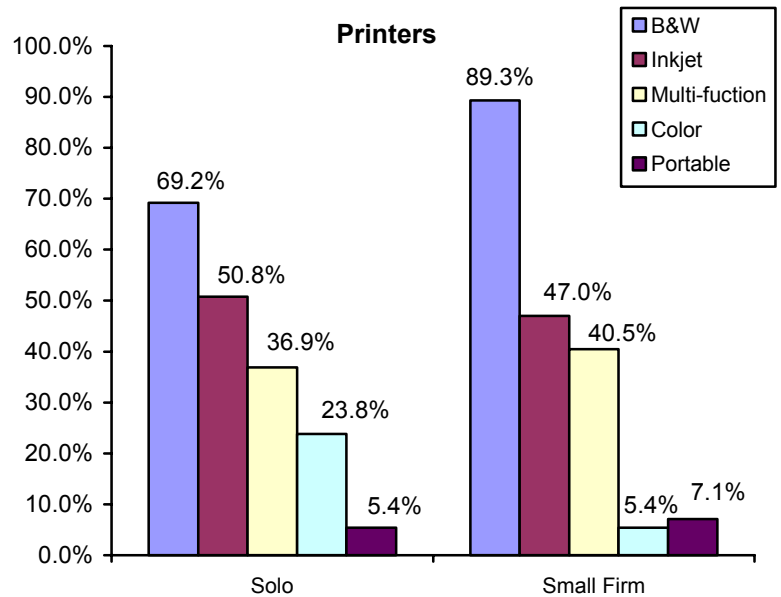
The operating system of choice, regardless of firm size, is Microsoft Windows, with 94.9% of solo practitioners and 93.8% of small firm attorneys choosing it over Apple Macintosh. The specific preferences breakdown as follows:



Like computers, cell phones have become necessary for attorneys in either type of practice (solo: 76.9%; small firm: 73.8%). However, personal digital assistants (PDA's) have not, used by roughly one third of the attorneys surveyed (solo: 31.5%; small firm: 38.1%).

Printers and Scanners

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

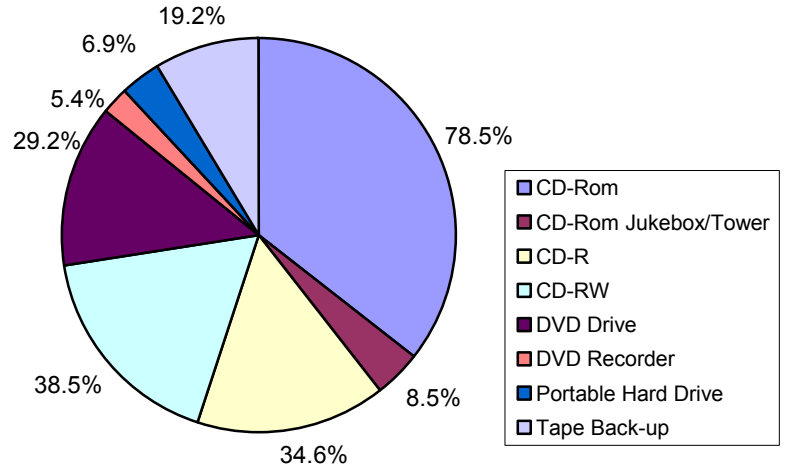


Unlike printers, scanners are not considered an office necessity, with less than half of the attorneys surveyed using the most prevalent type of scanner – the flatbed model – and even fewer using either sheetfed or portable models.

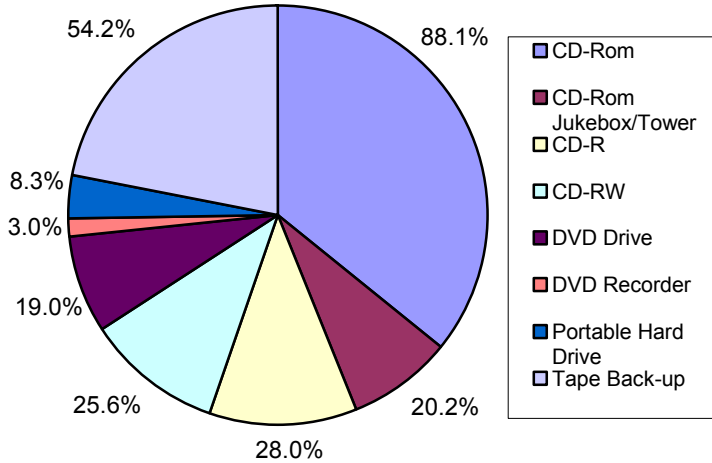
Storage

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 have gradually gained acceptance in both groups as well.

Solo Attorneys



Small Firms

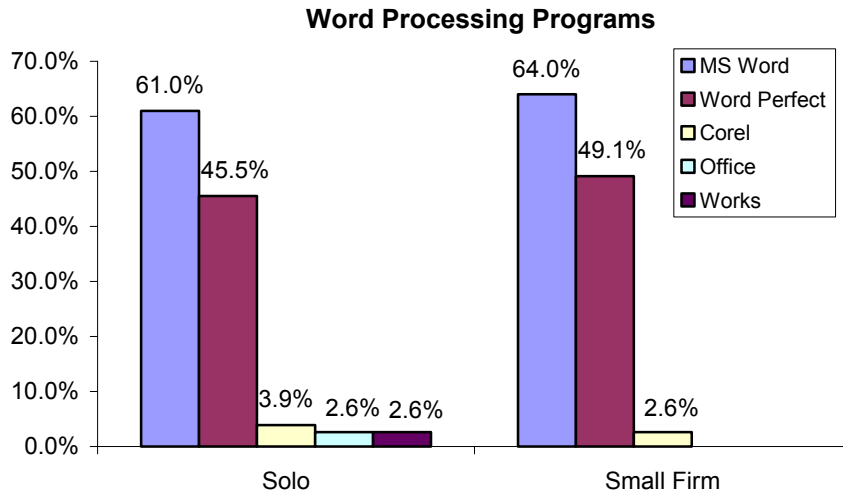


However, DVD-recorders have yet to establish a significant presence in either group. Similarly, portable hard drives are equally unpopular.

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: 90.0%; small firm 98.8%). MS Word is the most popular program, with Word Perfect a close second.

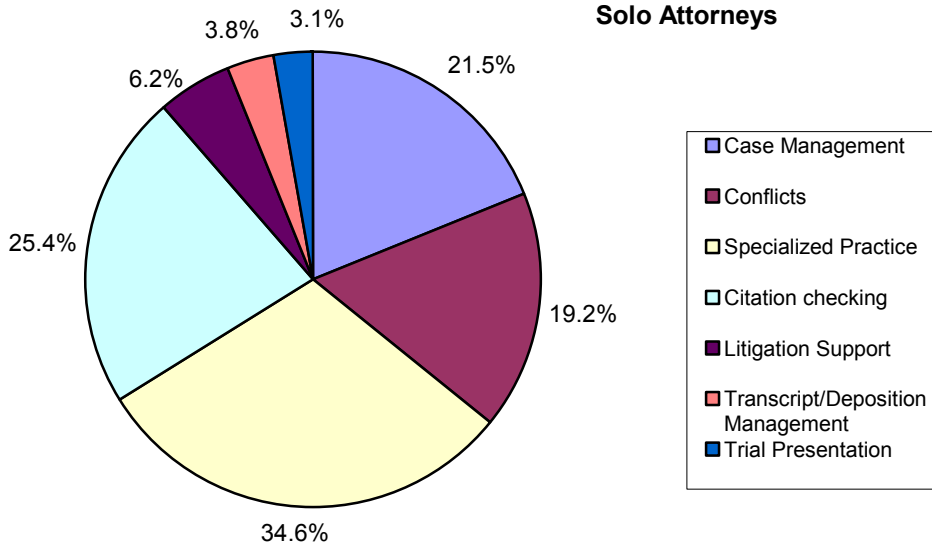


Also popular for general office software are accounting programs (solo: 60.8%; small firms: 75.0%). Though not quite as popular, both solo and small firms use spreadsheets (solo: 59.2%; small firms: 68.5%). Time and Billing software, while popular with small firms is not as common in solo offices (solo: 46.9%; small firms: 75.6%). And, predictably, Time Entry software is also more popular in small firms than it is in solo offices (solo: 33.1%; small firms: 56.0%).

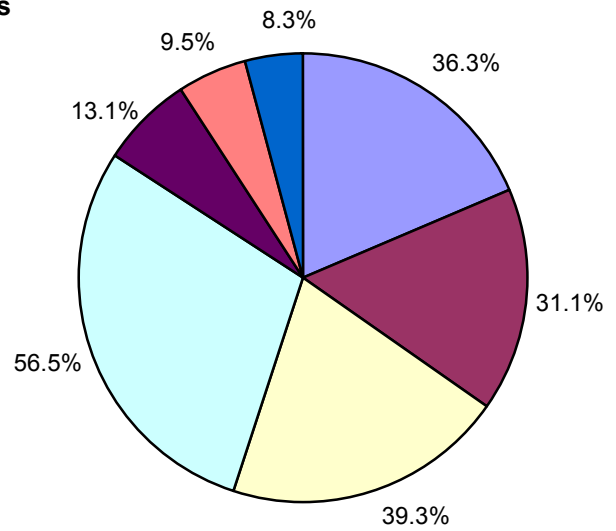
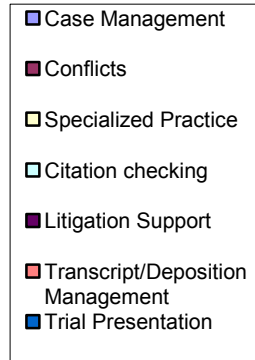
Legal

Software created specifically for the legal profession is less popular than general office software.

Solo Attorneys



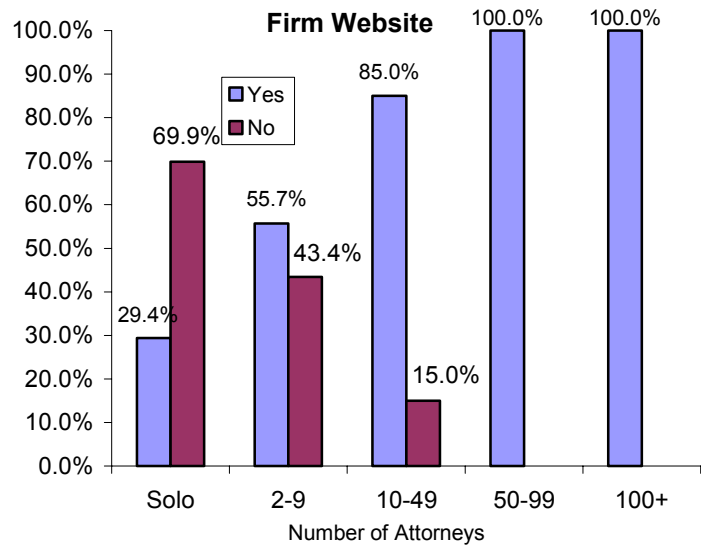
Small Firms



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.

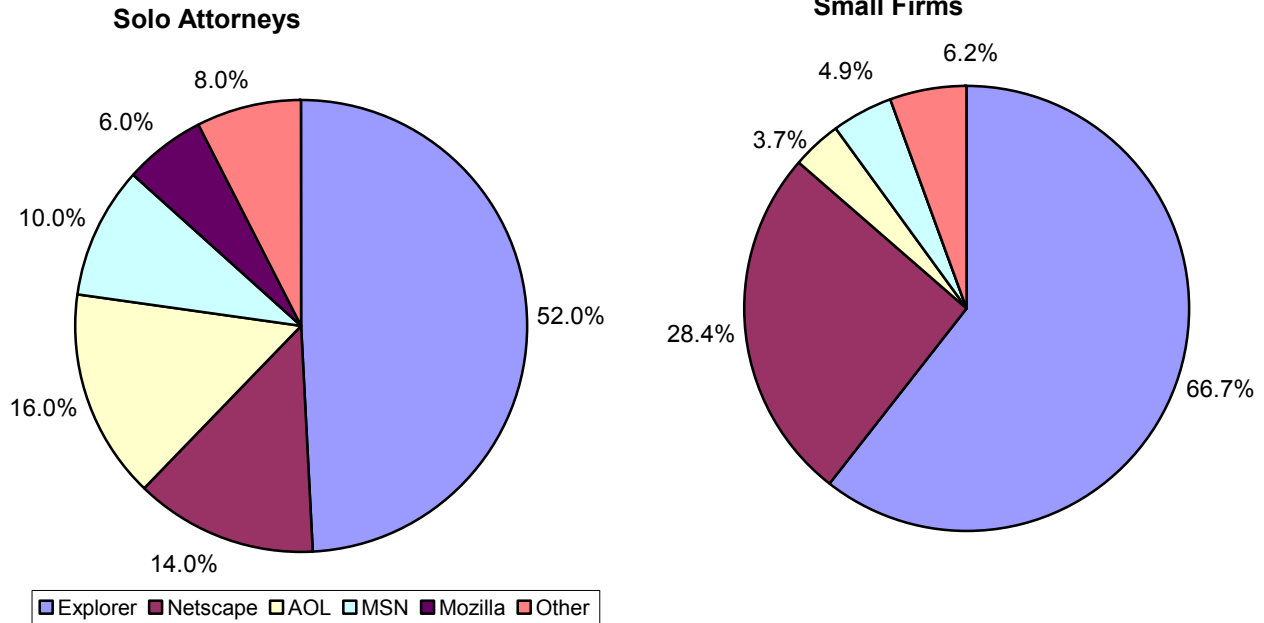


For those solo and small practice firms that do have a website, the solo group overwhelmingly prefers to have their site hosted by a third party (86.0%). In comparison, in small firms, 30% host the site themselves, while 53.4% use a third party. For website development, both solo and small firm practitioners use outside consultants or providers slightly more often than an internal resources. 48.9% of solo attorneys use a third party, compared to 35.6% who keep it in-house. In small firms, 43.5% outsource website development, compared to 31.6% who do it internally.

The majority of lawyers in both groups do own a domain name (solo: 73.3%; small firm: 79.3%), specifically the name of the firm itself or some variation, rather than a generic name that reflects a specific area of practice or a geographical location.

While a many solo and small firm attorneys do not use the web for marketing purposes, they do use it to perform research online. Solo practitioners are much more likely to conduct legal research using free online resources compared to their small firm colleagues (solo: 83.8%; small firm: 63.6%). Fee-based research, on the other hand, is more popular with small firms (solo: 54.8%; small firms: 86.7%).

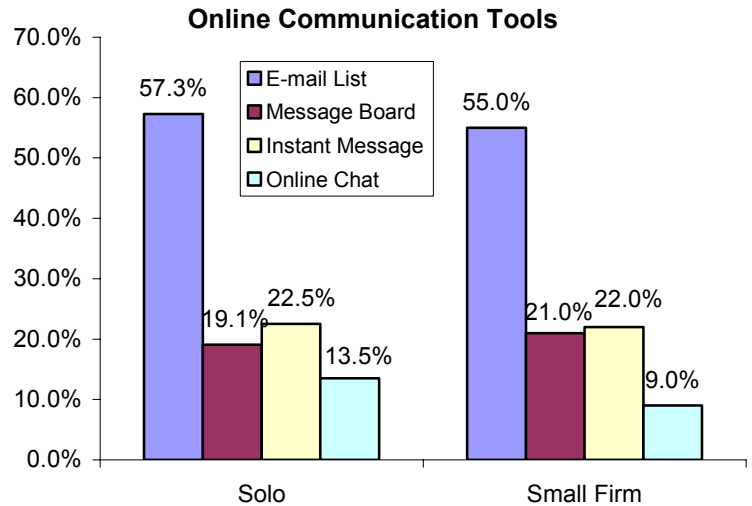
When accessing the Internet, the vast majority of attorneys, regardless of firm size, use Microsoft's Internet Explorer. It should be noted, though, that solo practitioners appear to have the wider distribution across browsers compared to their colleagues at larger firms.



Communications

As expected, e-mail enjoys significant popularity within the legal profession (solo: 83.1%; small firm: 94.6%) and is used primarily for routine correspondence (solo: 92.2%; small firm: 96.5%). Secondary uses of e-mail include updating clients on their case status (solo: 51.1%; small firm, 64.1%) and distributing marketing materials (solo: 48.2%; small firm, 53.0%).

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 2002 Technology Survey Report seem to indicate that solo and small firm attorneys have proven the most adept at leveraging low-cost or free technology solutions. As the cost of a specific type of hardware increases, however, the less likely it is that solo and small firms either have a need for said technology, or the financial and human capital available to invest in such technology. However, the survey also illustrates the multitude of technology options available to attorneys in all firm sizes and the continued impact such technology will have on the legal profession in the future.

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.