Teaching Technology to Judges

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"Among American knowledge workers, the group least aware of these technologies and least capable as a class of using the Internet and modern computing tools to improve their professional competence are judges."
- Hon. George Nicholson

I would suspect that most judges who read the technology column in The Judges’ Journal are computer users and are comfortable with basic online techniques such as e-mail and surfing the Web. Some of you may be interested in passing on your knowledge of technology to those of your colleagues who are less technically inclined. And truth be told, many of you are probably called upon to teach other judges about technology, whether you volunteer to do so or not. Arguably, it is in our own self-interest to share our knowledge because one of the primary benefits of technology is communication. The more we can communicate with our colleagues the better the system will work. As our courts move at an ever-increasing pace to digitize information and indeed, to move our courts away from a traditional paper-based system, judges who are at the vortex of those systems must be able to function intelligently simply to get their work done.

Unfortunately, many judges are not computer literate. Some even pride themselves on their lack of technological skills and wear it like a badge of honor, often stating one of the following refrains: “I’m an old-fashioned judge,” “I am no ‘techie’,” “I can’t even program my VCR,” “I’m too busy deciding right and wrong to worry about learning new machinery.” Others revert to the time-honored and condescending old saw: “I don’t type,” which is often offered not as a confession of ignorance but rather as an elitist claim that somehow typing is beneath their appointed station.

I have been teaching computer usage to judges for several years. After many failures, I reached some basic conclusions about how most judges prefer to learn. Oftentimes, the onus is placed on those who need and desire technological knowledge to find it for themselves. I believe, however, that the responsibility belongs to those of us
with an interest in technology to share our knowledge with others. So this column is not about learning technology but rather about teaching technology to fellow judges.

**Observations**

My first observation is that judges strongly prefer to be taught by other judges. Perhaps this is because we are reluctant to admit that there is something that we do not know or are reticent to ask for help from lay persons. Ignorance is not a virtue that the public expects from its judiciary and we are often loathe to admit ignorance, especially to a “techie” in blue jeans who is younger than most of our children. Perhaps it is a reluctance to let laypersons know how we actually do our business. There is apparently a strong felt need to preserve some mystery about the judicial decision-making process. Disclosing the details of the mechanics of that process, especially to a Generation X techie, is not something that many judges want to do.

Nevertheless, the most common technique used to teach technology to judges is the traditional classroom approach. Many local information technology (IT) departments offer classes that teach basic computing to employees throughout the government level, including judges. These are usually classroom laboratory environments where the students each have an individual keyboard and monitor at their desks and refer to a large projected computer screen for information.

My second observation is that judges do not learn technological material very well in groups. In my experience, I have found that seminar-based learning formats are most useful when their purpose is to alert judges to new issues or to direct judges to other resources. Often efforts to teach computer techniques to judges in groups, even groups taught by other judges, are not very successful. Perhaps this is because the nature of our job as judges requires us to learn alone on the bench asking questions of the lawyers and witnesses when there is something we do not understand. The group computer classroom does not fit that mode. Moreover, most group teaching models do not use computers or software programs similar to what judges will actually use in their work. It is, in part, that sense of the unfamiliar that may scare off some judges.
Some programs have done fairly well in spite of these difficulties. The most notable example is the National Judicial College (www.judges.org). The NJC concept recognizes that judges learn best from other judges and captures judge-students in an almost cloistered campus environment for all of its teaching. The NJC Judicial Technology Resource Center has recently been upgraded and is one of the better group teaching computer programs in existence. Nevertheless, the NJC approach has its limitations. First, it is difficult to get the professed “non-techie” judges to agree to attend a several day course to learn computer skills. Second, regardless of the newness of the laboratory equipment, it and the applications on it are not going to be the same as what the judge will use when he or she returns to chambers.

The "Office in a Box" Technique

In response to these observations, I concluded that the best way to teach basic computer and Internet skills to judges is for individual judges to teach their judicial colleagues one-on-one. The technique I have used is to get the student judge to agree to give me two uninterrupted hours alone with him or her in chambers on their own computer. This removes the concerns about admitting inadequacy to laypersons and demystifying the process. I start the session by assuring that the door is shut and that the secretary knows that no interruptions are allowed for two hours.

I use the “office in a box” analogy to begin. The idea is to get the student to think of the computer desktop system as an office in itself. There are parts of that box that contain many of the elements you have in your physical office. There are filing cabinets filled with your papers and case files. What’s more, there are also many filing cabinets that are kept in other offices, such as the court clerk or judicial secretary. Like your office, there are also several pieces of machinery, including the most advanced typewriter you have ever seen, a telephone-like device, and even a type of television and radio. Like your physical office, your computer office has a desktop where you can get at all of this information and where you can work on it. The monitor screen is then demonstrated as a desktop that is always there underneath the particular file you are working on. Basic Windows operating system skills are taught with the student in the
“driver’s seat” physically using the mouse (which demonstrates the fallacy of “I don’t type”).

There is also communication equipment on your desktop, the most important of which is e-mail. Getting into this equipment is as easy as using the telephone and you don’t have to worry about playing “phone tag.” The technique of opening a browser and the local e-mail application is then demonstrated. When the student opens the e-mail application he or she finds mail waiting that I sent to them before the tutorial. (I also find it convenient to bring and install a basic local address book so the student can immediately call up other court addressees.) The student then opens the e-mail message and learns how to compose and send a reply.

After e-mail, the more general use of the browser is explained as a communication device not only to send e-mail but also to see publicly available information. I analogize it to watching a television with millions of stations. To demonstrate this, I use the court’s own Website to show the biographical or docket data about the judge I am tutoring. I also demonstrate searching on the Web by having the student search for his or her name. (Remember the student does all the driving.) I then ask the judge what newspapers he or she likes to read. The student then searches for and locates that paper online and even arranges to have it “delivered” to his or her desktop daily if possible.

Getting into the filing cabinet section of the office in a box is next. Using the “My Documents” file, I demonstrate how the filing system looks like folders and pages in a real filing cabinet. Using the e-mail I sent, the student creates a folder and then saves the e-mail as a text file in that folder. Using the word processor, I have the student modify the e-mail text file by using the “cut and paste” function and then save it as a new file in the folder.

Finally, I tell the student judge that I will be e-mailing him or her every day for a week with new information and that it is important that he or she reply to each message. I have a series of e-mails, each containing URLs to a “legal” site and a “fun” site and
each asking the judge to tell me what they think of the site. The first message contains a couple reminders about how to access the sites using their browser. Subsequently, I e-mail the judge about some of the online learning sites where he or she can use the basic skills learned during our session to get access to more learning. One site in particular, www.findtutorials.com is an excellent starting point because it contains not only computer tutorials but also recreational learning devices.

Admittedly, this hands-on approach is time consuming. However, when compared to the amount of time spent teaching (and often re-teaching) judges in a traditional classroom or seminar setting, I have found that the two-hour session actually saves time. In the end, it is worth the investment if one more judge can use modern technology to more fairly and efficiently provide judicial services to the public.

**Some Good Online Computer Learning Resources**

National Judicial College - [www.judges.org](http://www.judges.org)

The Tutorials Search Engine - [www.findtutorials.com](http://www.findtutorials.com)

Free Online Courses and Tutorials - [http://www.docnmail.com/](http://www.docnmail.com/)

Museum of Modern Technology - [www.actden.com/skills2k/direct.htm](http://www.actden.com/skills2k/direct.htm)


Learning to Use The World Wide Web - [www.fvrl.bc.ca/learn/index.shtml](http://www.fvrl.bc.ca/learn/index.shtml)

Microsoft Learning Center - [www.microsoft.com/insider/learning/default.htm](http://www.microsoft.com/insider/learning/default.htm)

Basic Windows - [www.learnthat.com/courses/computer/windows/](http://www.learnthat.com/courses/computer/windows/)


Microsoft Word Tutorial - [www.baycongroup.com/word.htm](http://www.baycongroup.com/word.htm)
Free Online WordPerfect Tutorials - www.docnmail.com/Learn/WordPerfect

How Stuff Works - www.howstuffworks.com