

Speech Recognition – Ready for Prime Time

The time and cost involved in documenting case and client information, contracts, briefs and other materials has always been a struggle. But now it's further complicated by a challenging economy that has forced the reduction of lawyer to support staff ratio and increased client focus on higher value.

Many firms are beginning to rethink their internal practices – from staffing and billing to technology and client management. Even firms that have moved away from traditional billing by the hour in favor of alternative fees such as flat-rate or fixed fees are pressed to further to reduce the time and costs associated with each case in an effort to reduce overall operation costs.

Increasingly law firms (from solo practitioners to multi-national firms) are balancing the challenges created by the economy by leveraging speech recognition. Why? The speed, accuracy, and ease of use of today's speech recognition systems delivers a more efficient alternative to traditional approaches for document creation, email management, and even data entry for time and billing systems. Simply put, most lawyers can talk faster than they can type.

As case volumes and administrative costs continue to grow, some lawyers are being forced to take on more administrative tasks themselves. This may even be the case when an in-house transcription process is in place since many attorneys work late into the night – long after support staff has gone home. Creating documents by voice offers a faster, more efficient alternative to typing.

How Does Speech Recognition Work?

Speech recognition enables legal professionals to create electronic documents at speeds of up to 160 words per minute — three times faster than typing. Users just talk to their computers and their words instantly appear in the full Microsoft® Office® suite, as well as Microsoft Internet Explorer®, Corel® WordPerfect®, and virtually all other Windows-based applications, including widely-installed case and practice management programs.

A unique voice profile is created for each user of the system that contains information about the unique characteristics of that person's voice. This profile also includes a customized set of words, known as a vocabulary, and user-specific information including software settings that specify how words and phrases are capitalized, spaced, and formatted. Much of this customization can be done and distributed at the administrative level so

individual users don't have to spend much time on it at all – they can just concentrate on speaking clearly and letting the software learn their voice. The more a lawyer uses speech recognition software, correcting any mistakes that may occur, the more accurate results the software will deliver over time.

Beyond straight dictation, speech recognition software also enables users to command and control the computer desktop by voice. Virtually any menu item or dialog box can be controlled hands-free. Users can edit and format their work, launch applications and open files, manage email and work on the web. In other words, speech recognition helps to speed up nearly any task on the PC.

Many legal applications can be easier to use and more effective when deployed in conjunction with speech recognition. Searches, queries, and form filling are all faster to perform by voice than keyboarding. Document management, document assembly/automation, and case and practice management software programs are all highly conducive to control by speech. Tasks such as text and data entry can be completed by voice in most of these programs without any customization.

Since managing email takes up an increasing amount of everyone's workday, speech recognition software can be used to create, navigate, send, and respond to email by voice using popular programs like Microsoft Outlook® or Lotus Notes. In addition, some speech recognition programs contain text-to-speech technology that allows users to have their email documents read aloud, which enables them to complete other tasks while listening to their email.

Rather than use a standard headset microphone to interact with their computers, lawyers may be more comfortable with a Bluetooth headset. Using a Bluetooth headset with select speech recognition systems delivers the same great dictation results – without the wires. In this way, lawyers not only have their hands free to browse texts or notes on their desks, but they can also cross the office to consult references as necessary while continuing to dictate.

Third-Party Transcription

Legal professionals who are more comfortable with traditional transcription don't have to venture from their comfort zone. Lawyers simply dictate documents into a digital recorder — just as they always have — and download the audio file to their PC. Advanced speech recognition packages enable the transcribed text and synchronized audio to flow across an enterprise network to streamline the process of third-party review and correction.

The speech software operates transparently in the background so legal professionals who are comfortable with their current work style can continue to handle dictation as they always have — without ever having to interface with the speech system directly. At the same time, they can reap the many benefits that speech recognition has to offer, including faster document turnaround, lower costs, and increased support staff efficiency for transcription and correction services.

While most speech recognition systems can deliver high-performance dictation and application control capabilities right out of the box, upfront professional training and customization will enable lawyers and support staff to realize more significant productivity gains and cost savings and maximize their return on investment. Initial training speeds up the learning curve, instills confidence in users, reduces support costs, promotes the success of a pilot program, and maximizes your investment. Ongoing training support can familiarize staff with advanced features and functionality for continuous productivity improvements.