

Things You Should Know Before You Buy: Solo/Small Firm Computer Shopping

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One of the most daunting tasks facing the solo and small firm practitioner is deciding what type of computer to buy. The information that follows should be used as a starting point as you consider your hardware needs.

Considerations

PC vs. Mac

According to [LTRC's Legal Technology Survey Report](#) well over 90% of attorneys use Microsoft Windows. And since there are more attorneys that use PC's, software vendors have created more legal software for them. As a result, by purchasing the more popular choice, you will have a greater network of individuals to tap should you run into any hardware or software issues. So unless you are an avid Mac user, your best bet would be to buy a PC.

Desktop vs. Laptop

If you plan to do a lot of your work on the road or in court, a laptop would be a wise investment. Just be aware that in general, they are not as fast or durable as a comparable desktop model. If you do decide to purchase both a laptop **and** a desktop, be sure to keep both machines in sync.

Terms to Know

Processor

The "brains" of the computer. In general, the faster the processor, the easier it is for the computer to multi-task.

Speed

The speed at which the processor can execute instructions. So, the faster the speed, the faster the machine will work.

Memory

Random Access Memory (RAM) temporarily stores information while you are working, allowing you to shift from one application to another. The more RAM you have, the better. If you buy a computer with a certain amount of memory, and determine that you need more, you can always buy additional memory, provided your system allows for it. For this reason, it is a good idea to find out your computer's maximum memory capacity.

Hard Drive

The primary storage unit. The larger the drive capacity, the more you will be able to store. When choosing a computer, you will probably want to estimate on the high side, to avoid having to scramble for additional storage when your hard drive fills up.

Rotation Speed

This determines how quickly the computer can retrieve data on the hard drive. Most computers come with a 5400 RPM (revolutions per minute) drive, but if you upgrade to one with 7200 RPM, you will see a faster response time.

Drive Bay

The area reserved for various drives, such a floppy disk drive, a CD-ROM drive, a CD-RW drive, a CD-RW/DVD drive, or a DVD-ROM drive. The computer industry is gradually phasing out floppy disks and drives, meaning that many computers now do not come with an internal floppy disk drive. If you find that you do have many files on disk, you may consider getting an external floppy disk drive or simply transferring your files to CD-RW's.

- CD-ROM
Compact Disk-Read Only Memory. Most computers come with a CD-ROM drive that can read audio and data CD's, but not record new data onto CD's.
- CD-RW
Compact Disk-Rewriteable. This type of drive allows you to not only read CD's, but also record data as well.
- DVD-ROM
DVD-Read Only Memory. Similar to the CD-ROM, except that it can read DVD's in addition to CD's.
- DVD-RW with CD-RW Drive
This drive can read and write DVD's and CD's.

Operating System

This runs the computer's basic functions. If you are getting a PC, you will most likely be running some permutation of Microsoft Windows. You can still find computers with Windows 98, 2000, or Me. Of the three, Windows 2000 is more appropriate for business use. If you are buying a new system, your choice will be between Windows XP Home and Windows XP Professional. Windows XP Professional is a more robust operating system and thus recommended over Windows XP Home.

Bundled Software

Most computers will come with some type of bundled word processing, spreadsheet, and personal information manager. Based on the Legal Technology Survey Report, The Microsoft suite enjoys more popularity than other products. Of the three Microsoft packages, Microsoft Office XP Professional has the most software applicable for office use, specifically, Word, Excel, Outlook, Publisher, Power Point, and Access. Microsoft Office XP Small Business has Word, Excel, Outlook and Publisher. Microsoft Works includes only Word.

Recommendations

Processor

Intel Pentium 4 or AMD Athlon

Speed

Minimum 1 GHz, but most come at higher levels

Memory

512 MB of RAM

Hard Drive

Minimum 40 GB, 7200 RPM

Drive Bay

CD-ROM Drives have become standard for most computers. However, consider upgrading to a CD-RW. This will allow you backup copies of your files onto CD.

Operating System

Windows XP Professional or Windows 2000