

Thinking of connecting to the Internet?

by Sandra Davey

Introduction

With massive development in Internet software, particularly for the World Wide Web, and the media informing us that the Internet is the answer to all our corporate communication and marketing problems, Internet connectivity has generated an incredible interest amongst the profession. Coupled with the launch of the Foundation Law project last October, the Foundation has received some 1000 telephone calls from members of the profession who have expressed an interest in Internet connectivity. These conversations have varied from simple questions on the content and coverage of legal materials, to difficult questions regarding the delivery of full corporate Internet services to the desktop, billing and account maintenance, to internal policy documents regarding Internet security and staff use of Internet services. As a result of these telephone calls, I'd like to highlight some of the issues facing law firms, sole practitioners and chambers. In this short space however, I can by no means outline all the issues particular to an organisation, but I can point to some of the more popular.

What do you want from the Internet?

The first thing to consider is what you want from the Internet. The sorts of questions that have arisen in this area include do you want the Internet for internal and/or external information management (intranet v. internet), information delivery and marketing, client communication, inter-firm communication, a combination of the above, or, do you want the Internet because everyone else is doing it. If you choose to implement an Internet connection (and not all of us may do so at this time), then deciding on what you want (whether you are a sole

practitioner, part of a small firm or part of a large firm) will provide you with a framework for the type of connection you should purchase. Internet connections can be small dialup connections or large corporate wide solutions. It is easy to start small and expand. If you wish to maximise the use of existing resources (such as modems), it is possible that you will be able to incorporate them into an Internet setup.

Corporate Web Presence

Another issue for consideration is the establishment of a corporate presence by creating and maintaining a Web page. Web pages can be created cheaply or you can invest many \$\$\$ creating a sophisticated visual presence. A recent article in *Computers and the Law*¹ looks at the issues of maintaining a corporate Web presence. There is no point however, in maintaining a Web page if you are not going to invest the resources to keep it up-to-date and most importantly, to provide some level of content. To see some examples of excellent and shocking web pages developed by the legal profession, refer to <http://www.fl.asn.au/organisations.html>. With the Web still in relative infancy, you may find it unnecessary at this particular time, to implement a Web presence.

Support

Regardless of which type of connection you choose, it is important to acknowledge that Internet connectivity requires a support infrastructure. The connection has to be in place, the software has to work and staff need to know how to use the software. In order to derive the most benefit from the Internet, it's an honest fact that time needs to be allocated for staff to explore the Internet and its associated resources.

How this time is allocated is particular to your internal requirements and policies. In some cases, it may be smart to introduce basic help guides, to run introductory seminars or to conduct advanced training. It is also a known fact, that little time is devoted to training. Staff tend to pick up the basics of an application by playing around with it. If this is how it works in your organisation, it is essential that time is allocated to 'Web Surfing'. To help with the support infrastructure that is required with Internet connectivity, the Law Society of NSW and the Law Foundation will introduce customised legal Internet training courses from July 1996.

Domain Name System (DNS) Registration

Everyone wants a domain name (or we think we do). This is a unique Internet address particular to your organisation that is used for your email address, your web site, any other Internet tools you decide to support, and as a marketing mechanism. It is also the address you are now seeing on business cards, letterheads etc. The Law Foundation has fl.asn.au as our domain and lawsocnsw.asn.au is the domain for the Law Society of NSW. Domain names are really only applicable if you have decided that you wish to connect either your entire firm or your firm's email system to the Internet. For those that dialup with a modem, we tend to take the domain name of the Internet Service Provider (ISP) that we choose such as fl.asn.au if you are a Foundation Law user, pegasus.peg.apc if you have joined Pegasus, etc. For \$200, most ISP's will register your choice of DNS. To do it on your own (I do not recommend this unless you are particularly NetTech Savvy), see <http://www.aunic.net/>.

Security

Security is an issue confronting all of us. The type of Internet connection, be it dialup or a corporate wide connection will set the framework for your security considerations. For dialup connections where your internal network cannot be easily compromised, you can add an extra level of security by ensuring all passwords are a mixture of UPpeR and lowErCAse, and contain some non alpha-numeric symbols such as the * # \$) etc. As an example of a corporate wide connection, the Foundation has recently launched itself onto the Internet with a 64k ISDN line. To do this, we employed a Unix Systems Administrator (Silicon Graphics workstations running Irix) who amongst other standard network duties, is responsible for security of the network. In addition to this, we have engaged the services of external consultants to conduct an independent security audit prior to the machines going 'live' on the Internet.

Choosing the ISP

Choosing an ISP will differ depending on what type of connection to the Internet you have decided to implement. For dialup connections, the Foundation recommends Enternet (1800 269 950) but this is by no means exclusive. For a corporate connection, I would be looking quite closely at the ISP's network infrastructure (including links to the Internet), security, backup and redundancy mechanisms. For those of you interested in ISP services, I have written an article outlining the issues that should be considered which can be accessed from <http://www.fl.asn.au/foundation/training/index.html>. Although it focuses primarily on dialup connections, many of the same issues will arise for a corporate connection.

Bill Itemisation

A particularly important issue has been billing, account maintenance and itemisation of those accounts. For

those that have decided to purchase one dialup account (for trial purposes) where there is one UserID and one password, it has been difficult to let multiple people access the Internet and then bill back to the appropriate section for that online use. Most ISP's debit a corporate credit card monthly with no itemisation of actual use, so if this is a consideration for you, look for ISP's that provide a more sophisticated level of bill itemisation or who have multiple account maintenance facilities.

Other Information Resources

Many people have wanted to rush out and get an Internet connection so that they can cancel their CD and paper based research services. I would be hesitant at this stage of Internet development, to recommend this, across the board. Although there is an incredible set of core materials (14 Courts and three sets of legislation), you may wish to use your Internet connection to trial the legal research services before cancelling any of your existing products.

The Web and the Internet are here and many firms are already using the Internet for access to vital information, resource sharing and communication services. Rest assured though, you are not alone in grappling with the rapid developments in information technology. I hope this article has outlined some of the issues you are likely to be faced with should you decide to incorporate the Internet into your practice.

¹ For more information, see Bowman, Andrew, (1996), 'Profiting from the World Wide Web: Preparing to compete electronically' in *Computers and Law*, Vol 7, Issue 1, April/May, London, Society for Computers and the Law.

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