

Tomorrow's Legal Services

Sandra Davey, Law Foundation of NSW

The Tomorrow's Legal Services communications network is up and running, and is attracting considerable interest within the profession.

How Does the Network Operate?

It offers you:

- . electronic mail
- . document transfer with other firms and agencies
- . public and private conferences/bulletin boards
- . online "chat" facilities
- . access to information databases

Although the communications are electronic, they operate much like a private post office. You can send mail to the post office, or pick it up there. If sender and receiver happen to "arrive" at the post office at the same time, they can chat about their mail on the spot. While you are connected to the post office, you can also check the notice boards to see if there are any other people posting notices on topics which interest you.

The network file server, located at the Foundation, is the post office. When you send a message, it is stored on the file server until collected electronically by the recipient when they next log onto the network. So you do not need to have a telephone line or computer dedicated to communication via the network.

The network will run as a pilot at least until the end of the year. During this time, the communications software and access to the network will be offered to users free of charge, other than the cost of the phone call to log in. To log onto the network, your computer will need to connect to a reasonably high speed modem and a telephone line. We can advise you on what modems will and will not work on the network, and can obtain the recommended modem for you at a discount.

Some Key Features of the Network

Extensive review of potential communications software packages was undertaken during the feasibility phase of the Tomorrow's Legal Services project. The communications software chosen offers facilities which were seen as essential to an effective network. For example:

Different platforms are not a problem - the software can handle communication between Macintosh and Windows PCs, and between different word processing programs, such as WordPerfect and Microsoft Word. Of course it always helps to do some planning before you launch into electronic communication, but the software allows users to indicate the format in which they would prefer to receive file transfers. The software is based on a client/server relationship and is therefore simple to use and very graphical. Both the Windows client and the Macintosh client take advantage of standard keyboard commands thus easing the learning curve.

One function of the software which has attracted considerable interest is the history feature. This allows each party to track the progress of communications between them. You can check when your mail was sent, when it was read, or whether it is still unread etc.

How is the Network Being Used?

At this stage of the pilot project, some 70 users have access to the network. These include solicitors, barristers, the Law Society and the Supreme Court. Users tend to fall into two categories: those who wish to communicate, eg, solicitor to barrister, solicitor to client, possibly about a legal transaction, and those who are seeking particular information to help them operate as practitioners.

We have set up public conference areas to deal with a range of issues from Information Technology, including multimedia, law and technology, software and hardware, to Upcoming Events and conferences for other organisations, including the Bar Association, Supreme Court and the Law Society.

If you want to find out more contact Sandra Davey or Bill Briffa at the Foundation, on 02 299 5621.

