

## Which Computer: IBM or Macintosh?

When buying a computer, one of the more heartstopping decisions a barrister or solicitor has to make is whether to buy a Macintosh or an IBM-compatible. This choice is comparable in its importance and wide-ranging consequences to the choice between a Mercedes and a BMW (the author is German, so no other makes are in the running). It is not an easy choice, but the writer has long ago decided in favour of Mercedes - sorry, IBM-compatibles - and will now try to give a number of rational reasons to support his strong bias.

Many claims regarding reliability, ease-of-use etc. are made by the relevant manufacturers; therefore without a more penetrating (biased) analysis of the benefits and deficiencies of each machine, the first-time computer buyer may make a decision (buying a Macintosh!!!) based on advertising and promotion, rather than on their real needs.

The author feels that both machines have merit in different areas. It is fortunate that there is such strong competition between the two incompatible standards, because this allows a clear winner - everyone. Each side is striving hard to counteract any advantage the other side has. Therefore any differences tend to be temporary - but still relevant.

In general, barristers have very standard computing needs, mainly wordprocessing. The exception is document search and retrieval.

Document search and retrieval currently consists of these areas:

- a. Online searches (Info One, Lexis etc). For this application both Macintosh or IBM-compatible are suitable.
- b. Litigation Support. The two best products for litigation support are WordCruncher from Scantext and Evidence from Justlaw Computers. These products are only available on IBM-compatibles. There is also a host of other software for any conceivable litigation support need on the IBM products; the product on the Macintosh, 'Sonar', is only a middleweight compared to the heavyweight WordCruncher and Evidence.
- c. CD-ROM products. Here IBM-compatibles probably have the biggest advantage. The range of CD-ROM products available is much smaller on the Macintosh than on IBM-compatibles. Only on IBM-compatibles is there access to the current range of legal CD-ROM products, i.e. Info One (unreported judgments) and Diskrom (Corporations Code and code taxation legislation). There are moves to make some of these products available on the Macintosh in the future, but the author expects that the range of products will remain smaller.

### Secretarial Support

Currently a majority of secretarial staff use IBM-compatible machines; therefore buying incompatible hardware will cause difficulties on a day-to-day basis as much time and energy will be wasted in translating data from one machine to the other.

If temporary help is required for wordprocessing, spreadsheets, programming, or any other application, it is easier to find available staff trained on IBM-compatibles than Macintosh.

### Suppliers

IBM-compatibles are manufactured by many different companies. The Macintosh is only available from one supplier, Apple Computers.

### Upgrading

An IBM-compatible can always be upgraded quite easily. Upgrading a Macintosh is only relatively easy with the Macintosh II - which costs \$10,000 or more. The low-end models present significant difficulties in this area.

### Ease-of-use

Until the Macintosh came along, a mouse attached to a computer was considered to be the perfect tool for all humans with three or more hands. The Macintosh deserves a lot of credit for showing that the 'WIMP' interface (Windows, Icons, Mouses [sic!] and Pull-down-Menus) is vastly superior to an empty screen with a little flashing dot at the top.

The Macintosh's huge advantage in this area has dropped with the advent of Microsoft Windows 3.0 for IBM computers. Windows 3.0 has many of the benefits of the Macintosh but is also able to work with all the existing software on IBM-compatibles. Now, neither side has a significant advantage in this area.

### New Products

The Macintosh market is a niche market, i.e. the Macintosh is mostly used for Desktop Publishing. New products - with sometimes fantastic improvements - for Desktop Publishing tend to appear first on the Macintosh. However, any company which creates a new product which is not specifically for Macintosh's niche (Desktop Publishing) will first design the product for IBM-compatibles and only much later, after the product has become very successful, will it possibly be moved onto the Macintosh. Current examples are WordCruncher software, the best database programs, faxboards and most of the hot new software dreamt up in the attic by twenty-year-olds. (This is how many universally used software products began their life.)

### Laptops

The Macintosh portable is heavy, over 7 kg, and expensive. In comparison, the latest crop of IBM-compatible laptops easily fit into a briefcase and weigh less than 4 kg. These so-called note-book size laptops (for example, the Compaq LTE 386SX20) are fully-fledged computers.

In the author's opinion, for simple about-town driving - I mean legal applications - like word processing and elementary litigation support, it doesn't matter which product a barrister chooses. Very often, as with a Mercedes and a BMW, in many ways it is an emotional decision.

However, after some time of using a computer most barristers are looking for more demanding applications. Then the choice of a Macintosh can be akin to the realisation that only Mercedes also produce trucks. □

*Christoph Schnell is the Managing Director of Scantext, a company providing computer services to barristers and judges. He can be reached on (02) 261 4511, 185 Elizabeth Street, Sydney NSW 2000.*