



The Evolution of Dictation

by Florian Schwiecker

“Please take a memo.”

Ever since that phrase was first uttered, dictation has been an indelible part of the legal landscape. Over the years, changes in technology have made the legal dictation process faster and easier — from steno pads and typewriters to personal computers and mobile solutions. The most common dictation technology, until recently, was the analog tape recorder. However, law firms are increasingly exploring the ability of digital and mobile technologies to further streamline dictation workflow and enhance productivity.

The analog recording process is simple: attorneys dictate into a handheld or desktop device, remove the cassette and deliver it for transcription. The growing familiarity with digital dictation and document creation, coupled with heightened sensitivity to security and confidentiality issues, has made digital dictation a more accepted way for attorneys to record, share and archive documents.

The flexibility afforded by mobile solutions for smartphones and tablets provides an even greater degree of connectivity. Whether an attorney is in the courtroom or a meeting across town, he can remain in touch with the firm at all times. These technological advancements are great; however, deciding whether digital dictation and

document creation is right for an individual law firm requires an understanding of how the technology works and the advantages it offers.

How Digital Dictation Works

Analog dictation does provide a certain degree of mobility. Handheld recorders allow attorneys to complete dictation from their offices, in court, or offsite at depositions and conferences. The challenge is getting the actual cassettes to an assistant or transcriptionist. In the office, attorneys can physically hand the tape over or send it through internal office mail. From remote locations, they must rely on a courier or the postal service. Once the tape is received, transcriptionists must listen to the dictation — starting and stopping, fast-forwarding and rewinding — to decipher every word.

Digital dictation, on the other hand, offers broader mobility and flexibility due to the wide array of hardware devices. While attorneys can use small, ergonomic digital recorders that are similar to analog recorders, they also can dictate on their iPhones, iPads and BlackBerry devices, and then send their voice recordings directly to their assistants. They can dictate whether they are in the office, at a client site, in the courthouse or on the move.

The dictation is not stored on a tape, but in digital format on a small secure digital (SD) or media card, much like those used in digital cameras. An attorney can remove the card and hand it to a transcriptionist, or more importantly, the recorder can be plugged into a PC or docking station without removing the card. The voice file would automatically download, so it can be transcribed.

The Benefits of Digital Dictation

Here are a few of the advantages that digital dictation offers to law firms:

- **There is no need for attorneys to carry blank tapes, or scramble to deliver dictated tapes to support staff.** Digital recorders, tablet computers and smartphone applications give attorneys the ability to dictate on-the-go, and download files for transcription at their convenience.
- **Digital technology ensures that an attorney's tablet computer or smartphone device can be used for dictation, eliminating the need to carry a separate piece of equipment.**
- **Digital technology facilitates quick and secure file downloads from the recorder.** This eliminates the cost of delivery services and the risk of damaged, erased or lost tapes.
- **Dictation files can be uploaded directly onto transcriptionists' computers.** They are automatically notified that a new job has arrived, and they can see the priority and status of all pending jobs. An onscreen "player" allows the transcriber to use the PC as a transcription tool.
- **Files are identified by author name, date, client name or other data, making them easy to identify and track.**
- **Clearer sound quality improves productivity and turnaround time, as well as the accuracy of the transcription.**
- **Some digital recorders offer barcode scanners and voice command functionality.** These features allow attorneys to automatically incorporate demographic information — like client ID or work type — into the files. In addition to improving accuracy and enhancing security, these features also make it easier to identify and retrieve files.

- **Digital technology allows users to append supporting documents to the original dictation.** For example, an attorney can attach relevant e-mail messages or correspondence.
- **Encryption allows law firms and individual users to restrict access to files, so the dictation remains secure — no matter where it is recorded or transmitted.**
- **Digital downloads help speed workflow by eliminating any delay between the time dictation is complete and the time transcription can begin.** Transcriptionists can easily see jobs marked as "priority," and transcribe them first. Faster workflow frees up time for other mission-critical tasks. It may also allow firms to reduce the size of their transcription pool, or to use outsourced transcription services anywhere in the world.

“Digital technology facilitates quick and secure file downloads from the recorder.”

A Word About Voice Recognition

One of the features available with digital dictation and document-creation technology is voice recognition. It is a technology that has been on the market for a long time, but it has not gained widespread adoption. Voice recognition presents many additional advantages, but it is important for attorneys to understand precisely what the technology offers — and doesn't offer —

before deciding to incorporate it into a dictation system.

Attorneys must recognize the differences between voice processing and voice recognition. Most systems today use voice processing — a file is recorded, and a transcriptionist listens to it, transcribes it and processes it.

Voice recognition, on the other hand, converts the spoken word directly into written text. Transcriptionists do not need to key in every word; instead, they serve as "editors." They review the transcription while listening to the dictation to catch inadvertent errors. Voice recognition can be added to digital systems for an additional cost, but can represent a significant time savings.

While digital technology does not require the use of voice recognition, newer digital technology allows it to be added easily. In fact, some digital systems use the industry-standard Digital Speech Standard (DSS) voice file format, which automatically renders digital dictation files "voice-recognition-ready" so users can add this functionality at any time.

Innovation: Present and Future

Transitioning from traditional tape dictation to digital dictation and document creation will be a gradual process for many law firms. It is likely that older technology will co-exist with digital systems brought online incrementally, perhaps as replacements for worn-out analog units.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that some manufacturers are beginning to discontinue analog recorders and tapes, forcing the upgrade to digital systems. For this reason, some firms will choose to transition to digital all at once.

Most firms that have elected an across-the-board transition have found it surprisingly easy. Digital technology is intuitive and requires very little training, and workflow is streamlined with all users adapting a new approach at the same time. Across-the-board upgrades also offer firms additional bargaining power with vendors.

In short, digital dictation is now the clear choice for a growing number of law firms — not only because of the enhanced sound quality, but also because of the efficiencies gained in personal productivity and business operations.

Implementing digital dictation and document creation does not necessarily require a high-dollar commitment, either.

Firms must be sure to select a stable, well-respected vendor that offers the full range of digital functionalities — software and hardware, voice recognition integration, and applications for tablets, smartphones and other mobile devices. Who knows what the future may hold? Digital technology lets law firms optimize efficiency today, while setting a strategic course toward future innovations. **ILTA**



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