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TECHNOLOGY

Computers key part of many courtrooms

By Stephanie Hoops
Staff Writer

TUSCALOOSA Lawyers around Tuscaloosa are using more sophisticated technology than they did years ago, making PowerPoint presentations during trial and taking video depositions, but some of the technology is still too costly for some who continue taking their documents to Kinko's, blowing them up and pasting them to foam boards.

Attorney Paul Patterson often uses Kinko's-enlarged boards for visual aids. Next month the Tuscaloosa personal injury attorney said he plans to take his first video deposition, however, of someone in New York.

He said he's leasing video conferencing equipment from Harrison Construction Co., which is charging him \$150 an hour, according to Harrison's office manager, who declined to provide her name.

A local company, Apex Communications Inc. sells videoconferencing equipment similar to the type Patterson is leasing. they go for around \$5,500 to \$10,000, said Alan McPherson, Apex's owner.

Patterson believes technology is becoming more visible in the legal profession lately, and is certainly being used more to do legal research.

"I think the days of watching the attorney pour over stacks and stacks of books is beginning to fade and the new picture is an attorney seated in front of a computer monitor doing hours of research more efficiently," he said.

Microsoft PowerPoint is another example of technology now being used in more Tuscaloosa law firms.

Rosen, Cook, Sledge, Davis, Cade and Shattuck uses PowerPoint regularly, said shareholder Paige Carpenter.

PowerPoint cost the firm slightly more than \$5,000, she said.

"If you have an exhibit that's really important you want the jury to see, usually a document, you can project it onto the wall," Carpenter said. "We used to just pass a letter around to a jury.

But when a lawyer's talking about it, it sure is nice to have it projected on the wall or on the TV."

David Ryan is among local attorneys using PowerPoint as well. Ryan, a partner at Phelps, Jenkins, Gibson & Fowler said lawyers use PowerPoint more than they did in years past.

Most cases, however, still don't warrant the use of technology, Ryan said.

"It is so cost prohibitive to do that that it's really only justified if it is a big case or a case where there is a large amount of documents available," he said.

Having said that, however, Ryan mentioned that his partner Rusty Gibson had a document-intensive case that required the investment.

Gibson said he hired a consulting service out of Tampa to help him get organized before he went to trial in Cleveland in September 2001.

The company Gibson used, Trial Consulting Services LLC, scanned 400,000-plus documents and coded them so they could be easily accessed with a search engine. They also took Gibson's video-taped depositions, converted them to CD-ROM and then married them with the court reporter's transcripts so they could search by key words and show corresponding video during the trial.

"What it gives you is the ability to quickly make video clips for impeachment purposes," said Michael Boucher, executive director of Trial Consulting Services.

Boucher said his company's services could be had for anywhere from a few thousand dollars upwards into the millions.

Gibson said Boucher's service was worthwhile. He was able to show depositions and have a stream of text running under the witness with a companion screen that would flash documents with highlighted lines – all operated by someone sitting next to him at the counsel's table.

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