

# Computing Efficiencies, Computing Proficiencies and Advanced Legal Technologies

by Roger V. Skalbeck



Students, Cameron Rueber and Kristian Gluck at George Mason University's library.

Over the last eight years, I have worked as a librarian in several different legal environments, and my job has inevitably involved computers and technology. As a librarian, the issues usually relate to ways in which users interact with software features. Based on the experiences that I have had in helping lawyers and law students integrate, develop and comprehend technology in the practice and study of law, I will share some thoughts intended for computer users at all levels. These are arranged in the following three sections:

*Computing Efficiencies:* ideas for achieving better efficiency in performing day-to-day computing tasks

*Computing Proficiencies:* five computer proficiencies that could form the foundation of good understanding of using computers to support your practice or research

*Advanced Legal Technologies:* five advanced technology services and products

## Computing Efficiencies:

In using a computer every day, I try to work efficiently. As a light-hearted example of my view towards efficiency, I could really feel for Homer Simpson in an episode of the Simpsons where his task while telecommuting requires him to type in an answer "Y-E-S" to a continuous loop of the same question. He is ecstatic when he realizes that he can just type "Y" to answer the question. "I've just tripled my productivity!" he shouts. I don't subscribe to Homer's work ethic, slothfulness or reasons for telecommuting, but I do like his approach to cutting out keystrokes in routine tasks.

To become more efficient with programs that I use regularly, I find shortcuts and ways to work faster. In a Windows environment, many of the shortcuts and conventions are common to

various applications. I offer a top 10 list of my favorite Windows shortcuts. These should work within a majority of applications. (See table on next page.)

One of my favorite ways of using the keyboard to save time is to use the <ALT> key with a windows menu. If you press the <ALT> key and a letter that is underlined on the screen, you can use this as a defacto shortcut. For example, <ALT>F opens the menu available under "File" within an application. Before the advent of the ubiquitous computer mouse, programs used function keys (the numbered keys on most keyboards). Many programs still have these keys, so if you hunt around, you might find that a single keystroke would help you get a job done faster.

For help in solving annoying problems, you might look into an O'Reilly book series called *Windows Annoyances*, which is also available for several major Windows applications. The Web site: [www.annoyances.org](http://www.annoyances.org) includes numerous materials from the books, as well as discussion forums based on the operating system version.

## Computing Proficiencies:

In talking with legal researchers and practitioners, I hear frequently that they are frustrated because they don't know more about computers. My response is that you can't know everything about them, and I feel that there are a number of details that you probably never need to fully understand. For instance, a lawyer *generally does not need* to know how to replace a hard drive, how to write HTML from scratch, or how to upgrade a computer's operating system. To be efficient and effective in using computers in the legal field, one must have a few core proficiencies. The following are suggestions that may help you at least feel more at ease with using computers.

1. Be familiar with e-mail: how to send, receive and save file attachments. Advanced users will also want to know how to file messages in folders, how to back up messages to a local or external drive, and how use filters to manage e-mail subscription messages.
2. Browse the Internet to understand addressing formats and quirks. As an example, if you get to a Web page based on a URL such as <http://www.site.com/docs/file1.html>, and it's not there, know how to go to the home page of the site. In this example, try to find a page at: <http://www.site.com/docs/> to see if there is something more specific. Be able to recognize top-level domains, such as .gov for United States government sites, va.us for the state of Virginia and various commercial and international elements.


3. Understand a major word processing program, such as Word or WordPerfect. These programs are quite complex, but it's good to know some major functions as well as ways to streamline document production with forms, templates and selective copying.
4. Be able to navigate the Windows (or Mac) operating system to launch programs and find files using file navigation, such as Windows Explorer and/or a document management system. Be able to save documents and groups of files to diskettes and/or zip disks.
5. Understand the "big picture" of information storage and retrieval, including the physical location of critical data. There is no need to know technical specifications of data storage devices, but it is important to understand when something is on a local drive, on a computer in your server room, in a remote-storage database or on a site owned by a third-party.

Finding a document involves knowing where to look. Know the options, know how to get there, and know where the item is when it has been retrieved.

## Advanced Legal Technologies

To incorporate a higher level of sophistication into their law practice or study, consider the following five technology services and products.

1. Lexis/Westlaw content integration: Both Lexis and Westlaw offer solutions for the integration of research content and links for your intranet or other Internet-based sites. Westlaw offers their services under an umbrella of "West Integration Solutions" (<http://intranetsolutions.westlaw.com>), while Lexis offers their Intranet Solutions (<http://www.lexis.com/intranet>). The

Favorite Windows Shortcuts	
Shortcut	Function
<ALT><TAB>	This allows you to switch between application windows that you have open, which toggles in a single direction. To browse back in order, use <ALT><SHIFT><TAB>
<TAB> <SHIFT><TAB>	The <TAB> key might seem like an obvious one, but it works really well for navigating between form fields on the Internet (click to fill in the first form entry, <TAB>, next form box, <TAB>, etc.) Also, <TAB> will allow you to jump from one hypertext link to another on a Web page without the need to touch your mouse.
PRINT SCREEN	The print screen button will take a snapshot of the full monitor view on your computer, which you can then paste into a program like Paint to get a bitmap version of the screen. <ALT>PRINTSCREEN will copy just the active window.
<CTRL>A	This will allow you to select all of the text of a given document, range or section, depending on the application. Within a word processing document for instance, it selects all of the text.
<CTRL>C <CTRL>X <CTRL>V	These are some of the most common keyboard shortcuts: <CTRL>C to copy text, <CTRL>X to cut (or delete) text and <CTRL>V to paste it.
<CTRL>Z	This will usually UNDO your last operation. Many advanced programs support multiple levels of the UNDO command, which allows you the ability to roll-back several operations such as edits to a document.
<ALT>F4	With almost all Windows programs, this operation will close the active application window. For applications like Word or WordPerfect where you might have multiple documents open at once, you can also use <CTRL>F4 to close just a single document.
Windows Key-M Windows Key-D	On keyboards that have it, the Windows key is found between the ALT and CTRL keys (with a small icon on it). These two keystrokes will minimize all of your open applications so that you can see the computer's desktop. Windows systems often have the small icon that achieves the same effect if you click on it: 
Windows Key-E	Open the Windows Explorer, which is used for finding, managing and copying files viewable directly from your computer. (You also can choose the Windows Explorer command from the Program item in the Start menu).
F1	The most commonly-used function key is the "F1" key for help. If you are having trouble with an application, the click of a single button might get you some answers. At a close second for my favorite general-purpose function key is "F5", which Windows (and particularly Internet Explorer) uses to refresh or reload the page or document you are viewing. Netscape requires a second keystroke of <CTRL>R to refresh a Web page.

range of options differs for each service, but common integration options might include:

- direct links to primary authorities such as specific appellate decisions from the 4th Circuit,
- links to pre-defined searches to locate recent Virginia Supreme Court cases involving a selected party or cause of action, and
- search forms, grouped database links or forms to update caselaw with Shepard's or Keycite.

Both companies offer pre-defined groups of databases based on practice area, and both have options for search forms that they host. In addition to this, West offers news-clipping options.

2. Advanced docket monitoring and research: CourtLink (<http://www.courtlink.com>) and CourtExpress (<http://www.courtexpress.com>) offer specialized methods of researching and accessing court docket information on the Internet. CourtExpress is a service offered by a document delivery company to research and view dockets on-line with streamlined document ordering options. CourtLink offers similar docket searching options, and it provides options for researching multiple elements of available dockets, with docket monitoring based on party name, cause of action or other elements.

3. Citation conversion and verification software: Lexis and Westlaw offer software that can be used to convert word-processed documents and Web pages to find and hyperlink citations to primary legal authorities. The software works with Word, WordPerfect and/or Internet Explorer. The programs find recognized citations (e.g. statutes, cases, law reviews). They are converted into hypertext links, which point to the referenced materials on Lexis or Westlaw. These link to the updating services of Shepard's or KeyCite. Documents can be processed in batches for collected output to print or to update all cited materials. Products from either vendor can be downloaded from Lexis: <http://www.lexisnexis.com/citationtools/> called "CheckCite" and "LexLink"—Westlaw: <http://www.westlaw.com/software/> called "WestCheck" and "WestCiteLink."
4. Alternative on-line legal research subscriptions: If you feel that Lexis and Westlaw are too expensive, or if you just want to do preliminary research before turning to these services, consider a subscription to Loislaw (<http://www.loislaw.com>) or VersusLaw (<http://www.versuslaw.com>). Both offer subscription-based access to major primary resources such as cases and codes. They have more sophisticated searching options than most free services on the Internet. These services are provided entirely through the Internet, and subscription costs are modest.
5. Internet site management software: To create or maintain your own Web site, consider using a program like Microsoft's *FrontPage*, Macromedia *Dreamweaver* or Adobe *GoLive*. These products are great for creating Web pages, while requiring minimal understanding of Hypertext Markup Language (HTML). Of the three, *FrontPage* is probably the easiest to learn. To create individual pages, each product offers powerful site management tools, which can allow you to update links, text and graphics throughout your entire site—usually making it unnecessary to change one page at a time.

If you have questions, or want to share your favorite shortcuts, please contact me: [rskalbec@gmu.edu](mailto:rskalbec@gmu.edu). ☞



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