

True Mobile Voice Productivity Working While You W(T)alk!

by Steve Butterworth of BigHand Inc.

According to the *2007 ILTA Technology Purchasing Survey*, mobility is a major law firm IT priority. Over the past three years, the top technology purchases cited by the 126 firms surveyed were **mobile devices** (primarily new BlackBerry purchases or upgrades), wireless cards for attorneys, laptops and remote accessibility applications. The ability to connect remotely to the office, whether from home, a hotel or another office in the firm's network, is becoming a standard requirement. Thanks to modern legal digital dictation workflow systems and their mobile flexibility, attorneys no longer require access to a keyboard or an Internet connection to produce documents quickly or maintain client service levels. However, true mobility, meaning working effectively while "on-the-go," is still in its infancy.

Ensuring your attorneys can remain productive while they are moving between meetings, commuting to the office, traveling to another state or experiencing downtime at court is proving the next big hurdle in the mobility field. A smartphone keypad is only good for so much. It is common for an attorney to call his or her secretary's voice mail and leave messages with work to do. However, voice mail is not designed for dictation. The lack of ability to track and manage audio instructions is only part of the challenge with remote communication. Other issues include a lack of usability, flexibility and control.

Ideally, you want your lawyers to be able to connect immediately to the office from any location, through any system and efficiently dictate a document. Although dictation in the traditional sense of the word is not for all lawyers, the advent of the mobility plug-ins for legal digital dictation workflow systems are proving a boon for lawyers who are mobile. All they need is their voice and a dictation workflow system back at the office, and they can instantly and securely create a document, delegate instructions or follow up on action points while walking between meetings.

Assessing Mobile Productivity at Your Firm

The following factors should help you assess whether it is worth boosting the extent and productivity of your mobility strategy via a voice productivity system:

Use of voice mail. Speak to your secretaries or assistants about how often they have to act on instructions or dictated documents via the voice mail system. You may be surprised by the results. Many firms think no one dictates any more, and that may be because they are thinking only of dictation using professional handsets. Many attorneys continue to use the voice mail system heavily without considering it "dictation," and the secretaries find it a very inefficient working practice.

Average commute time and type. How do your employees get to the office, and how long is their journey? A commute longer than 15 minutes is often an opportunity to think about the day's events or plan for the next day. Recording thoughts verbally while on the move is a lot easier and quicker than stopping to type on a smartphone keypad. It is also impossible to type while driving (or should be), and hands-free devices allow attorneys to record instructions for the duration of a journey. If the message is not acted upon by a secretary, it will prompt an alert. The attorney, who is able to track and manage that voice instruction through a "work-in-progress" area, can then escalate the item.

Number of external meetings. Add up the number of meetings that are attended externally by professional personnel and the average journey time to those meetings. The total hours represent time that could be more productive. For example, with digital dictation systems, an attorney could record meeting notes while in a taxi and send these for processing or immediate action by a secretary. Once processed, the system notifies the attorney that these notes are completed and available.

Court time. If your practice has a litigation section, consider the time your attorneys spend at court and the connections available there. A voice tool could be highly useful and enable court-based staff to take advantage of more office-based support.

Interviews/statements taken. If your attorneys have to take depositions out on the road, at client sites or interview rooms, they could use digital dictation systems that allow them to transfer these interviews instantly and have them processed and ready for them when they return to the office.

Dictation Via BlackBerry

There are a variety of voice-mobility tools available to enable greater connectivity and expedite document production. Turning a BlackBerry device into a dictation device has been one of the big developments of the year. With the development of BlackBerry Operating System 4.2 (or 4.2.1 on the 8700), users can now record, edit and play back voice recordings on their BlackBerry smartphones and immediately upload these recordings wirelessly to their office for completion or transcription. That voice instruction or dictated document is instantly received and tracked within the workflow, allowing attorneys to manage their task lists.

Fast document turnaround times are important for maintaining good client service, and the ability to send a deposition or immediate response to a client means positive references for future work.

- BlackBerry dictation also has the potential to save law firms big money since lawyers will not need to carry two hardware devices for out-of-the-office dictation. An attorney could have a microphone for dictation while in the office and utilize the BlackBerry they already have for mobile working.

Dictation Via E-Mail Messages

Digital dictation workflow systems can also enable automated submission of sound-recorded e-mail attachments into the digital dictation system, with the flexibility to send from any e-mail account including Web services such as Hotmail or Yahoo. Such e-mail “gateways” enable lawyers to submit dictation to the office workflow from any computer that has an Internet connection, without the need for any client software installed. The author simply connects the dictation device to an Internet-enabled computer, uploads the dictation and sends an e-mail message to a specific address at the firm. Being able to have voice mail messages enter the workflow and therefore be subject to firm priorities and rules, certainly boosts efficiency and ultimately keeps clients satisfied.

The mobility suites offered by digital dictation workflow systems now afford a significant improvement in document turnaround times when compared to attorney-typed files. Further, they provide a useful remote safety net when attorneys lose remote connections. Being able to record instructions or a document on a BlackBerry device and knowing that a secretary 250 miles away can start work on it immediately is greatly beneficial for attorneys. A process that allows them to turn to other legal work and has the potential to further boost billings is a win-win for the attorney and the firm as a whole.

About our author :: :: ::

Steve Butterworth is President and CEO of BigHand Inc., where he is responsible for the North American Sales, Operations and VAR network and previously managed sales across Europe and Australasia. He has been with BigHand since 1999 and has a wealth of experience in the technology and HR implications of voice productivity software. Steve has overseen over 500 law firms move from cassette tape or standalone systems to digital dictation workflow software. He can be reached at inquiry@bighand.com.