

Trends in Legal AV

Historically, the legal community isn't thought of as a technology-savvy group. People usually evoke images of attorneys poring over stacks of books and papers, without an AV device in sight. However, modern day practitioners of law have adopted AV technologies like videoconferencing, document cameras, and digital video systems to serve their diverse and dynamic needs.

The General Services Administration (GSA) estimated in 2006 that there are approximately 2,158 federal courtrooms in the United States. That number doesn't reflect the thousands of state and district courts that also rely on modern AV technology for their proceedings, nor does it reflect the thousands of judges, attorneys, and support staff who rely on AV everyday to do their job around the world.

Despite the economy, courthouse budgets have remained strong for several reasons. First, the funding cycle is longer than other markets like corporate or houses of worship. Second, some states like California set aside funds for projects like courthouse construction and renovation that are protected regardless of the health of the overall state budget.

Courtroom AV

AV designers and system integrators who service the legal community, and courthouses specifically, are specializing in a niche market. "Because of the things that happen in the courtroom, you must have an understanding about how the judicial process works," says Kevin Sandler, CEO and president of ExhibitOne Corporation, a firm that specializes in courtroom AV technology. "The courtroom participants like technology with strong demonstrative capabilities. AV can be crippling to a courtroom if not done properly."

Martin Gruen, deputy director of courtroom design and technology for the Center for Legal and Court Technology, says that, "The biggest change is that the courts do a great deal more videoconferencing and digital evidence presentation than in years past. Videoconferencing is not the science fiction it was years ago. The technology has improved and the costs have come down."

Gruen says that even a small courthouse can afford a LifeSize Passport videoconferencing system, a broadband connection, and a router. He adds, "The real question is: can you afford not to?"

According to Sandler, the rising popularity of videoconferencing technology is for two reasons: remote arraignment and remote witness testimony. "Remote arraignment is growing quickly at the state level because it saves on transportation cost to and from jail," he explains. "Remote witness testimony is convenient because an expert witness doesn't have to travel to the courthouse. They go to a local endpoint, which saves time and cost."

There also is an increase in installations of digital recording systems, with Sandler seeing an even split between video and audio, and audio only systems. Rather than documenting what is currently happening, court reporters now review those recordings, transcribe them, and construct searchable indexes for future needs.

The use and acceptance of control systems is also on the rise. "Even judges who are hesitant users understand its enhancement to the courtroom. Control systems provide a way for the court to control evidence presentation from the bench," Sandler explains.

Gruen adds, "Control systems are an absolute necessity, but the program must be a simple, intuitive design. They need one button control for devices like document cameras. Attorneys are not tech experts."

Perhaps a large barrier to more digital video adoption is the switch from analog to digital video and the issues it creates. "Changing the aspect ratio from 4:3 to 16:9 seems like an easy switch, but it sometimes alters the presentation of evidence like a hand print. The distorted image can have a psychological effect on the jury," Gruen explains.

In mid-2009, the Center for Legal and Court Technology overhauled the AV in their experimental moot courtroom called Courtroom 21. Gruen refreshed its video systems and upgraded to DVI and other digital platforms over fiber optic. "It was the greatest nightmare of my life!" he says. "We're finding all kinds of glitches. For example, we're using an optical switcher, but each time you switch, there is an audible pop. We are a moot courtroom, so if something doesn't work then that's okay. But it's not okay if it's in a real courtroom. We have an ongoing effort to find the answers."

Derek Miller, CEO and president of inData Corporation, a firm that offers litigation software products and services notes that the adoption of AV technology is easier today than five years ago. "Attorneys are finally seeing the value of keeping the jury's attention. The information must be entertaining. People want to be involved," he says.

Law Firm AV

When an attorney leaves the courtroom, their dependence on AV doesn't stop there. According to the American Bar Association, there were 1,180,386 licensed lawyers in 2008 (the most recent year statistics are available). Each of those attorneys requires the knowledge and assistance to work everything from a projector and document camera, to a videoconferencing system and a control system.

"Many law firms don't go to court that often so they don't invest in their own presentation equipment," Miller says. "Some will rent a projector and screen or document camera if they need it for presentations."

Miller's firm consults on the management, organization, and presentation of evidence by attorneys in a courtroom. "The choice of AV equipment depends on the evidence and how interactive they want to be to the jury," he explains. "We are usually training associates, paralegals, or someone from the firm who is designated to run the presentation."

Meanwhile, within a law firm, there are two key trends that affect AV. First is the reliance on videoconferencing, webcasting, and video production as means of cost and travel savings as well as improved communication. The second is that most AV functions are grouped under the information technology (IT) department head.

Sandy Blanton, AV coordinator in the IT department at law firm Baker & Daniels, supports approximately 700 attorneys and support staff in her firm with videoconferencing and webcasting. "When I started working here nearly ten years ago, the firm had two presentation laptops and two portable projectors. An attorney would take a laptop out and I would go out with them to run the presentation system," she says.

Now they have ten portable projectors in addition to six installed projectors in conference rooms in their home office, and two to three projectors in each satellite office. "Technology adoption is driven by the need to communicate and the different modes of communication. Webinars are happening here every day – both attending and producing," she adds.

Blanton notes that the firm's director of tech services and the IT department head make the AV buying decisions based on what the attorneys need.

Vince Cordo, the director of IT service delivery at law firm White & Case, says that the scope of his AV responsibilities have grown over the past several years. "AV used to be more about projector set-up but the firm saw that videoconferencing and video production enhances in-house needs as well as the needs of the client," he says.

Today, Cordo's group has greater involvement in upfront planning discussions for off-site events due to the anticipated use of Tandberg videoconferencing equipment. "Videoconferencing makes it easy to connect. It's not just about travel costs. Videoconferencing improves communication, especially for a global company like ours," he says.

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