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Net Law: How Lawyers Use the Internet

Paul S. Jacobsen,
Songline Studios, Inc. 1997.
ISBN: 1-56592-258-1

Review by G. Wingate Grant[*]

Cite As: G. Wingate Grant, "*Net Law: How Lawyers Use the Internet*", 4 RICH. J.L. & TECH. 4 (Winter 1997) (book review) <<http://www.richmond.edu/~jolt/v4i2/grant.html>>[**].

{1} We have all had experiences where we listened to a preacher or maybe a law professor use a story to illustrate a point. Weeks later, we might not recall the point, but we remember the story. That was my feeling after reading through NET LAW: HOW LAWYERS USE THE INTERNET. This book might be considered a dictionary, a marketing book, or a computer book. Most significantly, it is an anthology of actual accounts of lawyers and their staffs successfully using the Internet to make their practices more efficient and, in some cases, lucrative. Now that I have your attention, let me describe the book a little more before recounting some of those examples to peak your interest.

{2} NET LAW: HOW LAWYERS USE THE INTERNET is very much an introductory book. Novice computer users will find enough hand-holding to muster up the courage to establish an Internet account and see what the Net is all about. There is even a CD-ROM in the back of the book containing America Online's Internet access software if you have not already been inundated with the floppy disks that seem to be mailed to every postal address in the country every two weeks. In the first four chapters of the book, author Paul Jacobson leads the reader in a discussion ranging from the considerations that one must contemplate when deciding on an Internet Service Provider (ISP) to a discussion of basic e-mail etiquette. Those with a fear of any topic heavily laced with acronyms will be reassured. All of those shorthand abbreviations and slang which emanate from the days when the Net was the private domain of scientists and the military are defined in the very concise glossary and in the text.

{3} The real strength of the book is the collection of first hand accounts by users who are quite adept at clearly explaining how Internet technology has impacted their law practices. Co-publisher Songline Studios is publishing "a series of books that use examples and stories from 'first wave' users who can convey a clear sense of why they need to be online, how it fits into their lives, and why it matters." [1] These anecdotal accounts cover three general areas: e-mail, research, and marketing. Anyone reading this review is likely to

find little that they do not already know about e-mail; because, if you have the technical savvy to have found this on-line law journal, then you probably know how to send and receive e-mail. If you have a friend or colleague who just cannot fathom why one would want to bother learning how to use e-mail, just quote them the following statistic: Internet users send many more e-mail messages each day than McDonald's sells hamburgers.[2] The ability to send and receive electronic messages will quickly become as commonplace in the law office as the fax machine. So if you or a colleague want to learn how to use this feature of the Net, with particular emphasis on issues which affect lawyers, this book will tell you what you need to know. There is a particularly good discussion of confidentiality and security issues with practical solutions ranging from telling your clients that Internet e-mail is not secure to showing you where to download the de facto encryption standard, Pretty Good Privacy (PGP).

{4} Those lawyers who graduated from law school in the post-Westlaw era, and some of us who learned how to use computers for legal research through much remedial instruction, will find a wealth of tips on how the Internet can be a research tool with horsepower equivalent to those commercial databases, the use of which is practically mandated if one is to avoid charges of malpractice. A real strength of NET LAW: HOW LAWYERS USE THE INTERNET is the number of free search services that are described. For example, if you need to find something in the U.S. Code, you can avoid those per minute charges by using the database at Cornell University Law School: <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/>.

{5} Jacobson has assembled a good collection of anecdotes of lawyers using the Internet to locate more arcane materials. An Australian attorney relates how he used a conventional search engine to find all the United Nations documents on prisoners rights issues.[3] In fact, the research capabilities of the Net are not limited to what we term "legal research." Factual research is a greater strength of the Net, and Jacobson gives enticing examples of how lawyers have used the Net to locate people or to glean public, but obscure information, about a client's competitor.

{6} That teaser in the first paragraph about how to make your practice more lucrative pertains to using the Internet to market your services. A great deal of space is devoted to helping lawyers decide if they could benefit from a home page on the World Wide Web, and to the practical considerations of creating such a Cyber presence.[4] Those who think they will never marry this sort of serious technology with a law practice will find far simpler ways to use the Web. One California attorney relates how posting messages regarding his expertise in immigration matters resulted in billings of \$500,000.[5] A Michigan lawyer describes how he located product liability plaintiffs for a nationwide class action lawsuit against an automobile manufacturer. [6]

{7} Jacobson has written a book for everyone in the legal profession. It is organized and indexed in such a way that one can quickly find topics of interest. The thoroughness of the book is exemplified by the attention to issues that might escape some of those new to the Net. For example, there is a brief discussion of the ethical and privacy concerns of using e-mail.[7] A common fault of any publication dealing with technology is that by the time it comes out in print, it is out of date. The publishers of NET LAW: HOW LAWYERS USE THE INTERNET made a special effort to bring this book to press quickly in order to preserve the accuracy of the information. They were remarkably successful in that regard.

{8} If you are still unconvinced about the need to become familiar with the Internet, contemplate this: electronic filing of pleadings is currently being tested in various jurisdictions around the country. One day it will probably be the only permitted method of transmitting one's documents to the court and opposing counsel. The 8 ½ by 11 inch piece of paper will face the same fate as legal sized paper, so do not wait too long to test the water. NET LAW: HOW LAWYERS USE THE INTERNET is a good tool whether you are learning how to swim or just looking for ways to increase your speed and efficiency.

{9} One of my hot buttons is the price of publications marketed to lawyers. Many publishers have the

mentality of my 14-year old daughter who thinks that price is immaterial if you graduated from law school. In this instance, however, it is hard to conceive of anyone who pays the \$29.95 cover price not being able to recoup that meager investment, probably many times over.

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[**] **NOTE:** All endnote citations in this article follow the conventions appropriate to the edition of THE BLUEBOOK: A UNIFORM SYSTEM OF CITATION that was in effect at the time of publication. When citing to this article, please use the format required by the Seventeenth Edition of THE BLUEBOOK, provided below for your convenience.

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[1] Paul Jacobsen, NET LAW: HOW LAWYERS USE THE INTERNET, at Back Cover (1997).

[2] *See id.* at 57.

[3] *See id.* at 112.

[4] *See id.* at 145-93.

[5] *See id.* at 130.

[6] *See id.* at 196.

[7] *See id.* at 62-75.

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