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Is 2010 the year lawyers enter the 21st century?

"We're probably about five years into a 30-year cycle of transformation. ... But there is simply no doubt that 25 years from now, when people reflect on the seminal changes of the early days of the century we are about to begin, the impact of networked computing will stand in relief."

— LOU GERSTNER

Many members of the legal profession simply are ignoring Internet technologies and writing them off as a fad.

In doing so, they are refusing to acknowledge a fundamental cultural shift has occurred.

Those lawyers, quite simply, are living in another century. Their failure to acknowledge and learn about the radical changes taking place ultimately will lead to their downfall, as more tech-savvy lawyers take advantage of the cost-effective and time-saving opportunities the new medium provides.

Two of the most important Internet technologies affecting the legal profession in 2010 and beyond are social media or, as I like to call it, "intermedia," and cloud computing. All lawyers with an interest in keeping their businesses afloat in the coming year would be wise to learn about and selectively use those two technologies in their law practice.

In 2009, "social media" became a household term. Social networking sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter saw an explosive growth as more and more businesses realized the connection between networking online and business profits.

Not surprisingly, the legal field was not immune from the phenomenon. A good percentage of lawyers in the past year attempted to engage in Intermedia in one form or another for the first time, as evidenced by a recent study of online networking in the profession.

The 2009 Networks for Counsel Study — available online at www.leadernetworks.com/documents/Networks_for_Counsel_2009.pdf — was conducted by Leader Networks on behalf of LexisNexis Martindale Hubbell. Some key findings include:

- Networking remains critical to the legal industry, yet resource constraints make it more difficult than ever.

- The use of social networking sites has grown significantly over the past year, with three quarters of all counsel now reporting they are members of a social or professional network.

- While some counsel take a "wait and see" attitude about the strategic value of the networks they've already joined, there is general belief online networking will change the business and practice of law over the next five years.

Like online networking, cloud computing — where applications, software and data are hosted by the cloud computing provider, offsite — also is gaining greater acceptance in the legal field. According to the Am Law Tech Survey 2009, 84 percent of responding law firms now use SaaS, a form of cloud computing, in some capacity. Most are using it for e-discovery or ancillary functions such as human resources, with only 7 percent use it to manage confidential client data.

As the concept becomes more familiar, however, more firms will use cloud computing for services such as document management or practice management. I predict those numbers will increase exponentially over the next few years as cloud computing providers adapt their products to respond to attorneys' concerns about the confidentiality and security of their data.

The bottom line is this: Intermedia and cloud computing, once emerging technologies, are being accepted slowly by our profession. Lawyers who choose to ignore them, take heed: You do so at your own risk.

The writing is on the wall; the choice is yours. Learn about emerging technologies and adapt or your profits will slowly, but surely, disappear.

We're nearing the end of the first decade of the 21st century. Whenever you're ready, you're welcome to join the rest of us in this century — the sooner, the better. We'll be waiting.

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