The T-Shaped Lawyer: Does the "T" Stand for Technology?

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You've probably heard about the T-shaped lawyer. The origin of the term was the "T-shaped person" – a reference which first appeared in a 1991 London newspaper article on the subject of computing jobs. The premise is that a T-shaped person has a depth of knowledge in one discipline (this is the vertical stroke of the T) as well as a breadth of knowledge across multiple disciplines that allows for collaboration and innovation (the horizontal stroke of the T).

C-suite executives talk with enthusiasm about seeking T-shaped employees who can successfully collaborate and innovate with our rapidly changing times.

As applied to lawyers, the vertical line is obviously the depth of legal knowledge – and that was all lawyers once needed to know. But in an over-crowded legal market, having a breadth of knowledge across other disciplines can mean the difference between success and failure. Mind you, many possible fields, not just technology, come to mind – it may be useful to understand medicine, project management or many other disciplines.

But we submit that the biggest horizontal line for most lawyers is technology. This is where so many of them can differentiate themselves from their colleagues. In a world of data breaches and government surveillance, lawyers are now ethically required to understand cybersecurity – and those who do have something valuable to offer clients.

They utilize whole disk encryption, have robust encrypted back-up systems, understand safe computing and can train others, and know how to function securely in the cloud. They also understand when "in person" meetings may be necessary – knowing the dangers of technology is increasingly causing "old school" personal meetings.

Then there is e-discovery and digital forensics, a fact of life for many litigators. The attorney who understands predictive coding, proper preservation of evidence

and how to retrieve deleted data or conduct a digital investigation has a big leg up when talking to a tech-savvy executive or General Counsel looking to hire a firm.

Data analytics (how to search across big data for meaningful trends, etc.) has a lot of appeal. And these same lawyers can use data analytic skills to compare how their firms stack up against other firms – or to figure out how to structure successful alternative billing structures that are a win-win for the client and the firm.

All this isn't just for BigLaw. "TinyLaw" is thought to have $90 billion in untapped potential for small businesses and individuals. Hence the success of LegalZoom and its brethren, but there are lots of ways to automate – assuming, of course, that you understand how to automate.

Don't understand social media? Then, as the boat captains would say, "You need to fish where the fish ARE." And that's where they are. Another significant skill set.

General Counsels and executives are tired of paying, usually by the hour, for technological incompetence. Many are demanding more competence (even the passing tech audits – and cybersecurity audits) to the chagrin of their law firms. The economic model of law firms has been fundamentally changed by this demand – and the cost of meeting it.

Have you heard the phrase "The Internet of Things?" This is where we are connected to the Internet all the time, through our computers, smartphones, smart watches, home appliances, fitness bands, security systems, video cameras and a plethora of other devices. The more this trend increases, the more technology knowledge a lawyer will need to have.

These are digestible tidbits of thoughts, but to us they add up to the need for more T-shaped lawyers with, in many cases, the horizontal line standing for technology.

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