



# CRIMINAL JUSTICE BOOK SUMMARIES

a service provided by the National Institute of Justice/National Criminal Justice Reference Service

## Word Processing in the Courts

The private sector has been using word processing technology for several years, but many courts are just now beginning to realize that it can be an inexpensive solution to paperwork problems.

Word processing can ease the paperwork load in many ways. For example, appellate courts can transfer opinions from one jurisdiction to another almost instantaneously, and many machines with word processing capability can communicate with LEXIS and WESTLAW to provide automated legal research and notices faster.

*Word Processing in the Courts* explains word processing technology to court managers and analysts and can help them plan and implement a word processing system. It does not compare particular models or manufacturers, nor does it evaluate all the functions now available. It does, however, serve as a guidebook for purchasing and installing a system.

### Word processing definitions and options

The **hardware** in a computer system includes the central processing unit (CPU), keyboard, cathode ray tube

(CRT), secondary disk storage device, printer, and optional special equipment.

The most important consideration in purchasing hardware is the size and expandability of the CPU's memory. The size and expandability are important because they allow the court to eventually increase the system's capabilities and memory.

Impact printers, with a removable daisy-wheel or thimble-type printing element, are more commonly used. Nonimpact printers (laser and ink jet) are becoming more common, but they can be complex, costly, and unreliable.

Also available is optional hardware that will allow court staff to transfer information from one place to another. For example, by using a device called a modem, information can be transmitted by telephone to and from a word-processing system and a computer, another word processor, or a phototypesetter.

The **software** is the stored instructions that make the hardware function. With so much software available on the market, each court should evaluate its needs carefully and choose software that best matches its needs. Courts with

word processing systems frequently need software with the following functions:

- Footnoting
- Dual column
- Widow/orphan adjustment
- File
- Select
- Default format
- Stored recall/display
- Forms input
- Justification
- Proportional spacing
- Simultaneous printing/editing
- Extra-wide line widths
- Glossary
- File sorting
- Math
- Decimal alignment
- Dictionary/spelling verifier
- Text recovery
- System security
- Typewriter feature
- Records processing
- Computer language compiler
- Microcomputer operating system

### Court applications for word processing

Word processors are useful for certain types of court documents but not others. Most courts use word processing for: (1) editing text and producing forms and (2) tracking cases and processing records.

### Editing text and producing forms

Word processors are particularly good for producing manuscripts, standard forms, correspondence, memoranda,

Summarized from *Word Processing in the Courts* NCJ 96028 by the National Center for State Courts and the Bureau of Justice Statistics with permission from the National Center for State Courts, 1984. 59 pp. including charts, worksheets, and appendixes. Summarized in February 1986.

*Word Processing in the Courts* is available from the National Center for State Courts, 300 Newport Avenue, Williamsburg, VA 23187-8798. Price: \$10.00 plus \$2.25 postage and handling.

and cost-benefit analysis before purchasing or renting a system. Monitoring, evaluating, and refining the system are important followup actions.

### **Feasibility study**

A feasibility study documents the court's need for a word processing system. One desirable approach to conducting a feasibility study is to collect and analyze the documents that the word processor might produce. The court can determine the volume and frequency with which each type of document is produced, who receives the documents, and how they are transmitted. When the results are tallied, the court manager can assess the court's needs and decide which word processing features are necessary to meet those needs.

### **Cost-benefit analysis**

The court manager's next task is to weigh the fixed and variable costs and the tangible and intangible benefits of the system.

Fixed-costs include the word processor itself, its maintenance fees, space and related services consumption (e.g., electricity), office furniture and accessories, site preparation and equipment installation, staff training, any additional personnel needed, and software or equipment modification.

Variable costs are supplies and fluctuating personnel needs, which may be difficult to estimate.

Tangible benefits may include more precise, accessible, and accurate information that results in reducing or limiting future growth of support staff, case processing and document preparation time, and access time and manpower. Intangible benefits may also include improvement in the quality of typed documents and court administration or improved efficiency and morale of staff.

### **Procurement process**

A common method for obtaining word processing equipment is to issue a request for a proposal (RFP) that is distributed to as many vendors as possible.

Courts that choose the RFP method usually follow four steps: identify which hardware and software features are needed, classify the features according to importance, evaluate each vendor's proposal, and compare and select the vendor and model. (The text contains a sample worksheet for evaluating the responses to the RFP.)

The court may purchase, rent, or lease equipment. Purchasing a system is generally advantageous when:

- The court will purchase only a few low-priced word processors (under \$6,000–\$7,000);
- The court has extensive experience with word processors and is assured that they can adequately meet all existing and projected needs; or
- The court would have to rent or lease the equipment for more than 3 years.

It is generally advantageous to rent or lease with an option to buy when:

- The court has no experience with word processing;
- The court needs additional word-processing capability for a short period;
- The court cannot sufficiently evaluate whether the word processor has adequate capacity and performance capabilities;
- Funding sources are limited;
- A substantial number of word processors or a large shared-resource word-processing system will be obtained; or
- The manufacturer cannot provide all the desired hardware and software.

Evaluating the vendor's documentation is also part of the purchasing process. Good documentation generally includes a description of the system, an implementation plan, operations manual, user's manual, and a detailed system design.

### **Implementation and training**

Word processing systems normally require only a few months to implement. Selecting a project manager to be responsible for overseeing the installation, training, and conversion process can make the transition period smoother.

Word processors require rooms with reasonably cool temperature and low humidity. Electrical fluctuations can seriously damage equipment, thus some word processors may require special outlets, dedicated power lines, or higher amperage. Lighting and equipment should be placed for comfort, access, and productivity.

There are three alternative approaches courts can take for converting to a new word processing system:

- Install and implement the new system and discontinue the old manual approach simultaneously.
- Operate the new and old systems simultaneously for a specified period of time thus protecting against failure of the new system and allowing the court to compare the two systems.
- Convert self-contained applications or subunits, such as indexing or notice preparation, piece by piece until conversion is complete.

Regardless of the conversion process, temporary reductions in productivity are likely until the staff has had enough time to learn to use the system. If low productivity persists, the court can investigate the possibility of vendor responsibility or require further training.

### **Monitoring, evaluating, and refining the system**

To assess the adequacy of the service, supervisory personnel can routinely evaluate and audit the system and survey users. Audits can verify that procedures to enter and process information and produce documents are operating correctly. System assessments determine if the system is meeting its operating standards.

Because word processing technology is advancing rapidly, the contract with the vendor can stipulate that the vendor will provide software enhancements at no cost for up to 1 year and at a nominal cost after that.

*Word Processing in the Courts* contains numerous tables and worksheets as well as the following appendixes:

- A sample typing survey to assess a court's need for word processing;
- A sample RFP to word processing vendors;