

Book Review by Martin Kratz *A LAWYER'S GUIDE TO THE COMPUTER*, Robert B. White, Q.C.

If you are a lawyer who is afraid to touch a microcomputer keyboard because you think you will break something or think you will look stupid or if you are impressed because your nine-year old child can load and operate a programme, then this book is for you. Robert B. White, Q.C. has provided you with an introduction to the mysterious world of computers written in a humourous and approachable style.

You can also think of this book as an introductory encyclopedia to the curious jargon of the computer industry.

Whether you read the book as evening entertainment or sneak into your office, close the door, hold your calls and decide to learn something about computer technology, you will not likely be disappointed. If you are already an initiate, part of the priestly class that subscribe to several computer magazines, then this book will not bring you much new information. However, you may still enjoy the author's humourous style.

There are numerous species and sub-species of microcomputers in the jungle of this new technology. Like many users, Mr. White clearly has a preference for the system which he apparently personally uses . . . the Apple McIntosh shown on the back cover of the book. Mr. White is properly impressed by the sophisticated graphics of the Apple McIntosh and the ease of using the icons to select functionality. The reader must, however, keep in mind that while such sophisticated graphics are entertaining you may not find many significant areas of application in the practice of law. Similarly, you may not want paddles or joysticks for your business system.

Mr. White accurately recognizes law as a creative activity requiring discretionary decision making. For that reason computer technology will not replace the lawyer's role but, like any new tool, will enhance the lawyer's productivity.

The section of the book dealing with computer assisted legal research has a good introduction to the use of the quick law or QL Systems Ltd. databases. Mr. White does, however, appear to fall into the trap of assuming that such databases have *all* the cases one might be looking for when conducting legal research. Of course, an introductory and humourous volume such as this may not be the place to discuss, in detail, the strengths and weaknesses of computer assisted legal research. However, the reader must be aware that there is no magic in computer assisted legal research and the users failure to intuit those key words used by the head note writers will mean that certain cases may not be located during a research session.

Mr. White's book does not deal with the databases developed at the University of Alberta, Faculty of Law nor the very sophisticated and advanced databases offered by Westlaw and Lexis. Unlike the older Canadian QL Systems, the American services Westlaw and Lexis avoid the problem of usage variation between the law book publishers by providing a consistent approach to word usage throughout the database. Further, users will find the full text of decisions (especially English and Commonwealth

case law) most valuable as well as the ability to "shepardize" instantly. These databases are, of course, as vulnerable as the QL Systems Ltd. or any other databases to spelling errors or other data contamination. Errors in a case report or headnote may destroy the users ability to access the case report.

Mr. White's book has little material on the acquisition of computer systems. If a reader were to go through most of the book then he or she would find a considerable focus on hardware. However, as Mr. White accurately states, on page 123, software is the starting point in acquiring a system. Begin by determining what it is you want to accomplish, then determine what software will give you the functionality you require, consider what compromises are necessary to fit into your environment (i.e. prior equipment) and with a view to the equipment presently in place look at, hardware options.

Mr. White seems discouraged by the use of consultants in assisting law firms in determining their needs and obtaining recommendations on acquisition of appropriate technology. The law office manager must be cautious that a consultant may have a particular vendor tie but many consultants can provide a very useful service to the legal as well as other professions. Mr. White places considerable reliance on the consulting services of the large professional accounting firms. These services may be no better or no worse than independent consultants. Many management consulting divisions of large accounting firms have vendor ties.

Mr. White suggests that children may be a useful source of advice when acquiring a computer system. However, you must, of course, be cautious in taking such advice. The last area that one may look for intelligent and shrewd advice in relation to sophisticated business systems may be children.

Of course, the technical content of Mr. White's book is dated insofar as it relates to specific vendor systems because of the fast rate of technical change within the computer industry. For example significant advances have been made in lap top computers since the time that this book was published. Since, however, the strength of this book is not its technical content but its humour and its humorous basic introduction to general themes in computer technology then the book itself is not dated. As a result if you find the idea of computerization confusing or frightening then this book will be a valuable and entertaining introduction for many years to come.

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