

Creating Apps for the Legal Gap

By John Love Norris IV

Look around. The days of pen and paper are numbered. Law firms are going paperless. Information is stored in clouds. Receptionists are virtual. Attorneys have become dependent on technology to run their practices.

With technology putting pressure on both the old and new, a gap in the legal profession has formed — between those comfortable with using technology and those stuck in the “ancient” times of legal pads and filing cabinets.

Contrary to popular belief, this is not only impacting the older generation of attorneys. Reliance on technology has led to a tight squeeze in the job market for young attorneys. Law firms hand out fewer and

fewer six-figure salaried positions each year, and entry-level positions of the past, such as contract or document review, are being outsourced or automated in an effort to cut costs.

Meanwhile, older attorneys are being forced to modernize their practices to complement their client’s dependence on technology and social media. In addition to email, texting is quickly becoming a common form of attorney-client communication. Staying relevant now requires practitioners to maintain an online presence, such as posting blogs and actively participating in social media platforms, in addition to practicing law. Advertising budgets are now focused on pay-per-click campaigns through websites,

such as FindLaw and Facebook.

Applications (or “apps”) are useful tools necessary to close this gap. The surprising thing about apps is that everyone can possess the skills to create one.

What is An App?

An app (application) is a type of software that allows you to perform specific tasks. Apps come in many forms, such as word processors, web browsers and games. Apps are developed through a set of typed instructions known as software programming language.

Programming language is simply a combination of vocabulary and grammati-

cal rules that instruct a computer to perform specific tasks. Common forms of programming language are Javascript, Java and PHP.

An Old Dog Can Learn New Tricks

Anyone can learn a programming language. The Internet provides opportunities for individuals to learn computer programming, no matter their skill level. Websites such as CodeAcademy.com provide individuals with lessons to facilitate the learning of software coding. Students of the academy have the option to either take part in building a real project or select a specific web development language or library to learn.

Tips on Building an App

Be Creative.

An app can be demanding upon the developer and its success depends on his/her available time, programming skills and technological skills—resources which some attorneys may lack. However, lawyers have one quality that overshadows all the rest: an ability to create. The profession has long instilled upon lawyers the ability to think outside of the box. As an app developer, one must not only possess the quality of logic, but that of being artistic.

Be Simple.

An app does not have to reinvent the legal process. Simplicity will reduce the complexity of the build and, in turn, will reduce the complexity of using the app. Apps as simple as calculating the date and time have become popular with practitioners and judges in order to calculate procedural time delays.

Be Practical.

An app must be practical. Practitioners must be able to use it as a substitute to doing it the “old” way. Finding something practical may be found through observation and practice. Observe the legal process in local courtrooms instead of fiddling with phones. Explore ways to better inefficient processes. Apps that can calculate sentencing, judicial interest and child support will always be practical in the legal profession — if, for no other reason, than simplifying the math.

A Glance at the Future: Law Schools Teaching Software Coding

Loyola University College of Law explores the use of technology in the practice of law through its Litigation and Technology Section of the Stuart H. Smith Law Clinic and Center for Social Justice. In its second year, the clinic is one of only a few of its kind nationwide, requiring students to actively represent clients in courts while also designing and implementing technology-related projects aimed at assisting legal practitioners and increasing access to justice. The program is directed by Associate Clinical Professor R. Judson Mitchell.¹

“The purpose of the Litigation and Technology Clinic is to provide students with hands-on litigation experience, while designing technical solutions to assist legal practitioners,” Mitchell said. All apps created through the Clinic are free for practitioners and the public. The software code is open source and readily available for others to study and use on GitHub, the world’s largest open source community. So far, the Litigation and Technology Clinic has released three apps (LaCrimBook, DocketMinder and Multiple Bill Calculator) and one search engine, Huey.

LaCrimBook

LaCrimBook is a web-based app that aims to replace West’s big and expensive handbook of criminal law with a free digital alternative. The HTML5 application runs anywhere and works with or without an Internet connection. Further, LaCrimBook is set to automatically update any legislative changes to any criminal law — meaning attorneys can rest assured that LaCrimBook provides the latest edition of the Louisiana Criminal Code.

DocketMinder

DocketMinder is an app which helps individuals follow the latest minute entries on the Orleans Parish Criminal Court docket. After creating a free account, the app allows for users to select cases they are interested in. When the docket changes, an email is sent to the individual’s specified email address. The app may be viewed on the individual’s desktop computer, tablet or phone.

Multiple Bill Calculator

Multiple Bill Calculator is a web-based tool to help lawyers calculate minimum and maximum sentences under the Louisiana Habitual Offender Law. The calculator uses JavaScript to quickly calculate the minimum and maximum sentencing ranges for multiple offenders and can be used on any device with a browser, with or without Internet. Multiple Bill Calculator is the first tech project of the Clinic to be offered on iTunes.

Huey

Hueylaw.org was designed to provide a user-friendly search engine for those in need of Louisiana statutory laws. Users simply enter key search terms and the engine produces highlighted results. The search engine is an application program interface (API) available for software developers.

Conclusion

Unless something better replaces them, apps and other social media technologies will be part of an attorney’s day-to-day practice for quite awhile. It’s also a given that as more legal needs arise, more apps will be developed to handle those needs. Stay tuned!

FOOTNOTE

1. R. Judson Mitchell is an assistant clinical professor and pro bono coordinator/homeless advocacy director at Loyola University College of Law. His areas of legal experience are criminal defense, civil liberties and homelessness. He also is interested in the application of Internet technology to law practice, having written a number of software programs (e.g., ClinicCases) for law school clinics and non-profit agencies.

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