30 Technology Tips in 30 Minutes

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I.   INTRODUCTION AND DISCLAIMER

This chapter will provide some basic information on technology for the public utility law professional. It will begin with an overview of some law office essentials, then discuss specific resources that are available for professionals. Many of these resources are available over the Internet. Unfortunately, names and addresses change very frequently on the Internet. This information was accurate when it was prepared (August 1998), but some of it will become outdated over time.

Specific brand names, product names, and Internet sites are used for illustrative purposes only. Neither the author nor PBI endorses any specific product or service.

II.   LAW OFFICE ESSENTIALS

This section assumes that the law office has a Microsoft Windows-based computer with a modem or other connection to the Internet. If you don't have access to this equipment, that's the first tip: get it! Computer prices are the lowest they have ever been. For $1000 or less, a small law office can equip itself with an excellent computer. A few hundred dollars more will be needed for a high-quality printer and some of the additional software and hardware that is mentioned here.

>   A.   **Essential Software.** In addition to some of the essential law office programs (word processing, time and billing, conflicts management), here are a few tips for software that you may have overlooked.

>>   1.   **Fax.** Often overlooked, but equally essential to a great word processing program, is fax software. The leading product in the market is WinFax Pro from Symantec. Windows95 and Windows98 come with features that let you send a fax from your computer, but they don't have the flexibility and power of specialized programs like WinFax Pro. These programs make it easy to send a fax to 40 or 50 people, each with a personalized cover page, without having a secretary stand at a fax machine for half the day.

>>   2.   **Database / list management.** One of my pet peeves: receiving three different envelopes from the same lawyer on the same day or, even worse, getting multiple copies of the same document because I'm on more than one part of the service list. They wasted a lot of their client's money and for no good reason. Good database or list management

software makes it possible to ferret out duplicate names on service lists, print labels and certificates of service automatically, and generally make it much easier to manage the large service lists that are common in public utility practice. The major word processors come with mailing list capabilities built in, or you can use separate data base products, like Microsoft Access, dBASE, or Lotus Approach.

3.   **Anti-virus.** One of the dangers of exchanging information with other people – whether it's over the Internet or by passing disks back and forth – is that viruses can be picked up. Good anti-virus software is absolutely essential. Make sure that it's easy to update the software (most programs can be updated for free over the Internet), since new viruses are created every day. Also make sure that the anti-virus software stays in the computer's memory and is always keeping a lookout for any suspicious activity. The advertisements by anti-virus software manufacturers each claim to do the "best" job in detecting viruses. I have no idea who's right; all of the major programs seem to do a good job of protecting against most viruses, but none can give you a 100% guarantee. The leading programs seem to be Norton Anti-virus by Symantec and the McAfee Anti-virus program.

4.   **Shipping.** If you send even a couple of packages each month by a delivery service (FedEx, UPS, etc.), you should be using their software. Each delivery service has its own software, usually available at no cost, that allows you to keep address books, create shipping labels, schedule packages for pickup, and track packages to their destination.

5.   **Adobe Acrobat.** Adobe Systems, Inc., has created a program called Acrobat that displays and prints exact reproductions of pages on any type of computer and printer. The Acrobat Reader software is free on Adobe's Internet site: *http://www.adobe.com*. The software to create Acrobat pages must be purchased from Adobe. The Acrobat Reader should be installed on every computer, since the federal government publishes a great deal of information in this format, including the full text of the

Federal Register and *Congressional Record*, as well as most government publications. Many courts and state utility commissions are also using this format to publish decisions on the Internet.

B. **Essential Hardware.** Having a computer, modem, and printer is no longer enough. These additional hardware purchases will pay for themselves in short order.

    1. **CD ROM.** Just about every computer made in the last three or four years comes with a CD ROM drive. If your computer is older than that, it's worth the investment to buy a CD ROM drive (or to buy a new computer that has one installed). CD ROMs are inexpensive ways to distribute large amounts of information and, as you'll see below, there are some terrific products for public utility attorneys that are available only on CD ROM. Also most software programs, including most of those mentioned above, are distributed on CD ROM, making it much easier and faster to install those programs on your computer.

    2. **Removable hard disk.** The ZIP drive from Iomega and the SuperDisk from Imation are the two leading products in this category. These companies offer removable disks that hold more than 70 times as much information as a typical diskette. That translates into 100 MB of storage or more. These drives make it easy and painless to back up your important information, send large documents to clients or commercial printers, and take work on the road. The drives keep getting smaller, lighter, and less expensive.

    3. **Scanner and OCR software.** A scanner can save countless hours of typing documents that someone else already has typed. Great scanners are available for about $100; they're actually better, faster, and more accurate than the $1000 scanners of three or four years ago. The scanner turns a piece of paper into a digital picture in your computer. Optical character recognition (OCR) software will turn that picture into text in a word processor. Also, don't forget the benefits of scanning documents then using fax software to send them on their way. There's not much time savings when you're sending the document to one

person, but when you have to fax it to 50 people, you'll want to be able use your fax software to do it.

C.   **Essential Procedures**

1.   **Back up your stuff.** Never forget the first rule of using a computer: Every piece of hardware will stop working some day. That includes every diskette and every disk drive ever made. To be safe, and to avoid potential liability claims, you should back up all of the data in your computers every day. With low-cost tape drives and removable hard disks, there is no excuse for not making backup a routine part of the day.

2.   **Get some training.** If you and your support staff don't feel comfortable with computer basics or the software that you're using, get some training. Most computer stores, community colleges, universities, and even many high schools offer computer training classes at all levels.

3.   **If it ain't broke don't fix it.** Fight the urge to always have the latest and greatest piece of software and hardware. The computer is a tool; not an end in itself. If the tools are working, leave them alone. You may not need to have the most recent version of your word processing software or the latest hardware gadget. If things are working and your staff is productive, leave the computer alone. One exception: upgrade your anti-virus software frequently.

III.   LEGAL RESEARCH

No manual can hope to cover all of the legal research sources that are available over the Internet, on CD ROM, and through on-line services. Undoubtedly, each person will have his or her favorite sources of information. This section will briefly discuss some of the important sources of legal information for the public utility practitioner. With a few exceptions, the commercial legal research services (Lexis and Westlaw) and their CD ROM products (West publishes most reporters and statutes on CD ROM) will not be mentioned in this section. Those services continue to be an important source of decisions, statutes, and regulations. This section will highlight information that is available at no cost over the Internet and a few CD ROM products that are not as popular as the West collections.

A.   **Federal**

1.   **Courts.** Every decision issued by the U.S. Supreme Court and the U.S. courts of appeals is available over the Internet, usually on the same day that it is issued. With few exceptions, the district courts and bankruptcy courts are not making their decisions available over the Internet. Don't try to keep track of where each court has its site; instead, rely on one of the major law school sites to do it for you. One excellent site is the Legal Information Institute at Cornell University: *http://www.law.cornell.edu*. The Legal Information Institute has been on the Internet since at least 1993 and continually updates its links to court sites and other legal resources throughout the country.

2.   **Statutes.** The U.S. Code is available from several different sources on the Internet. Each has the full text of the Code available, by title and section, as well as through full-text searches. Read the information at each site to see the date of the version of the code that is available. To get the most up-to-date information available, search the *Congressional Record* or public laws sites listed below.

        a.   **Legal Information Institute at Cornell University.** Cornell has developed a customized program to search the U.S. Code. The program is very fast and displays the code, section by section, in a very easy-to-use format: *http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode*

        b.   **House of Representatives Law Library.** The U.S. House of Representatives makes it easy to search the U.S. Code, *Congressional Record*, and public laws through their comprehensive Internet site: *http://law.house.gov*.

        c.   **Government Printing Office (GPO).** The GPO Access service allows you to search the full text of the U.S. Code, *Congressional Record*, and public laws. Most documents are available in plain text or in Adobe Acrobat, which provides exact reproductions of the original documents. GPO Access is available through several sites on the Internet; one of the easiest to use is Purdue

University's site:
http://thorplus.lib.purdue.edu/gpo/.

d. **Library of Congress.** The Library of Congress has a site called "Thomas" (named for Thomas Jefferson) that makes it easy to search the *Congressional Record* and a database of public laws: *http://thomas.loc.gov*.

3. **Regulations.**

a. **CFR on the Internet.** The full text of the Code of Federal Regulations is available through the House of Representatives' law library and GPO Access (see above).

b. **CFR on CD ROM.** One of the most cost-effective legal CD ROM services available anywhere is the CFR service from Solutions Software Corporation (*http://www.env-sol.com* or e-mail: *solution@env-sol.com*). For about $200 per year, you receive the entire CFR on two CD ROMs in Adobe Acrobat files. This allows you to view and print exact reproductions of pages from CFR. It also comes with a search engine that allows you to conduct full-text searches. The service provides quarterly updates of the entire CFR.

c. **Federal Register on the Internet.** The full text of the *Federal Register* is available through GPO Access on the day of publication. You can search the full text of the register and retrieve plain text or exact reproductions of the pages in Adobe Acrobat.

d. **Federal Register on CD ROM.** Solutions Software also offers the *Federal Register* on CD ROM, usually six months or one year at a time.

e. **Federal Register Table of Contents.** The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency offers a service that delivers the table of contents to each day's *Federal Register* by e-mail on the day of publication. To subscribe to the service, send an e-mail message to *listserver@unixmail.rtpnc.epa.gov*, leave the

subject blank, and in the body of the message type *subscribe EPAFR-CONTENTS2 <your first name> <your last name>*.

4.   **Legislation.** The full text of the *Congressional Record* can be searched from GPO Access, Thomas, and the House of Representatives' law library. The Thomas site also provides other useful ways to search for pending legislation, including by subject, sponsor, committee, and key word.

B.   **Pennsylvania**

1.   **Courts.** Decisions from all of Pennsylvania's appellate courts are available, usually on the day that they are issued. An easy way to access these decisions is through a Web site maintained by D. Pamela Gaines, an attorney in Southeastern Pennsylvania: *http://www.dpg-law.com*. The official court sites can be reached through the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts: *http://www.courts.state.pa.us*.

2.   **Statutes.** Official versions of Pennsylvania statutes are not available over the Internet, but unofficial versions of some portions of the statutes are available at: *http://members.aol.com/StatutesPA/Index.html*. This site includes an unofficial and incomplete version of the Public Utility Code. Under recently enacted legislation, Act 55 of 1998, the legislature is directed to study ways to "provide access to public legislative information within the computer information systems" operated by the legislature "to persons outside the General Assembly." It remains to be seen what type of access will be provided and whether it will include the full text of existing statutes, as well as proposed legislation.

3.   **Regulations.** The *Pennsylvania Code* is not available over the Internet. Recently, the full text of the *Pennsylvania Bulletin* has been made available, by subscription, over the Internet on the day of publication: *http://www.pabulletin.com*.

4.   **Legislation.** Official versions of proposed and enacted legislation are not available over the Internet. Act 55 of 1998, discussed above, may change that in the near future.

In the meantime, two legislators are making available full-text versions of enacted legislation. Representative Italo Cappabianca and Senator Vincent Fumo maintain sites at: *http://moose.erie.net/~italo/bills.html* and *http://www.fumo.com/Recently_Enacted_State_Laws/*, respectively.

5.   **Other Pennsylvania Legal Resources.** Legal Communications, Inc., the publisher of *Pennsylvania Law Weekly* and *Legal Intelligencer* maintains a thorough Internet site with connections to many resources of interest to Pennsylvania attorneys: *http://www.legalcom.com*.

C.   **Public Utility Resources.** Some states are much further along than others in publishing their decisions over the Internet. For the foreseeable future, public utility practitioners will need to continue to rely on Public Utility Reports (PUR) for comprehensive access to state public utility commission decisions from throughout the United States. Individual states, however, are providing access to all of their decisions over the Internet, including California and New York, among others. Federal agency decisions, including all orders issued by FERC and the FCC, are available over the Internet, usually on the day that they are issued.

1.   **Lexis / Westlaw.** PUR is available through Lexis and Westlaw. Both services offer flat-rate pricing plans that allow practitioners unlimited access to utility-related libraries for a fixed monthly fee. The price of these plans varies with the size of the law office. Lexis and Westlaw can be contacted on-line at *http://www.lexis.com* and *http://www.westlaw.com*.

2.   **PUR on CD ROM.** PUR is available on CD ROM on an annual subscription basis. Information on the products available from PUR can be found on its Internet site: *http://www.pur.com*.

3.   **Federal agencies.** Most federal agencies make their decisions and other publications available over the Internet. The gateway to federal resources on the Internet is Fedworld: *http://www.fedworld.gov*.   Following are three agencies that are of particular interest to public utility practitioners.

a. **Federal Communications Commission (FCC).** Everything published by the FCC, from press releases to the full text of decisions, is available on its Internet site: *http://www.fcc.gov*. In addition, you can sign up to receive the FCC's Daily Digest (a summary of actions taken and documents issued by the FCC and its bureaus) by e-mail, on the day that it is issued. To register for this free service, send an e-mail message to *subscribe@info.fcc.gov*, leave the subject blank, and in the body of the message type *subscribe digest <your first name> <your last name>*.

b. **Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC).** All FERC decisions, as well as a number of other documents issued by the commission, are available through the Commission Issuance and Posting System (CIPS). CIPS is available on FERC's Internet site, *http://www.ferc.fed.us*, as well as from a dial-up electronic bulletin board. To access the electronic bulletin board, you need to dial 1-800-856-3920 from communications software. In addition to CIPS, FERC's bulletin board also has areas that contain the full text of all FERC Form 1 (the annual reports filed by electric utilities) along with software to read the reports, electric power data, and gas pipeline data.

c. **Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC).** The NRC's Internet site, *http://www.nrc.gov*, contains the full text of all NRC decisions, regulatory guides, technical reports (NUREG), evaluation reports (SALP), the NRC's regulations (Title 10 of CFR), and numerous other documents issued by the commission.

4. **State agencies.**

a. **Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission (PUC).** The PUC maintains an Internet site, *http://puc.paonline.com*, that contains a good deal of information about the commission, as well as the full text of some PUC decisions, information about

electric competition, and other utility-related items. The agenda for each public meeting also is available on the site.

b. **Pennsylvania Office of Consumer Advocate (OCA).** The OCA's Internet site, *http://www.oca.state.pa.us*, has basic information about that office, as well as information for consumers about utility-related issues in Pennsylvania.

c. **Other Pennsylvania agencies.** Each state agency has an Internet site that contains at least some basic information about the agency. The gateway for Pennsylvania state government information on the Internet is *http://www.state.pa.us*.

d. **Other states.** Many state utility commissions and consumer advocates have Internet sites. The quality and quantity of information varies, but several state commissions publish the full text of their decisions on the Internet. Lists of state commission Internet sites are maintained by the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners, *http://www.naruc.org*, and on the Public Utility Home Page (see Section V.D, below). State consumer advocate Internet sites can be found through the National Association of State Utility Consumer Advocates: *http://www.nasuca.org*.

IV. NON-LEGAL RESEARCH

A. **News Services.** There are dozens of utility-industry news sources available on the Internet. Most of them are on-line versions of printed publications. The on-line versions usually carry a subscription charge that is similar to the printed version of the publication. A fairly comprehensive listing of these news sources can be found on the Public Utility Home Page (see Section V.D, below). Following are two sources that provide free news summaries for utility professionals.

1. **Energy.** Energy Central publishes a daily news summary of items concerning the energy industry. The news summary is available at no cost by e-mail. In order to receive the full

text of news stories, an annual subscription is required. To sign up for the news summary and to receive information about subscribing to the full-text service, you must register on Energy Central's Internet site: *http://www.energycentral.com*.

2. **Telecommunications.** The Benton Foundation in Washington, DC, publishes a daily summary of communications-related news stories. To subscribe to this service, send e-mail to: *listserv@cdinet.com*. In the body of the message, type: *subscribe benton-compolicy <YourFirstName> <YourLastName>*.

B. **Electronic Clipping Services.** Several electronic news services are available on the Internet. These services cover some of the utility industry trade press as well as major wire services, press releases, local newspapers, and international news sources. Two services that are worth examining are Newspage, *http://www.newspage.com*, and Inquisit, *http://www.inquisit.com*. Newspage provides a free headline service arranged by category. There are hundreds of categories available, including several that deal with the energy and telecommunications industries. Headlines and press releases are free, but the full text of most stories is available only for a fee. Inquisit is a subscription-only, customized news clipping service, delivering headlines, summaries, and full text of news stories by e-mail.

C. **Newspapers.** Almost every major newspaper in the world has an electronic version available over the Internet, usually at no cost or for a nominal subscription charge. Of particular interest to utility practitioners might be the *Wall Street Journal (http://wsj.com), Philadelphia Inquirer (http://www.phillynews.com), New York Times (http://www.nytimes.com), and Washington Post (http://www.washingtonpost.com)*.

D. **S.E.C. Documents.** The Securities and Exchange Commission (S.E.C.) requires publicly traded corporations to file most reports in electronic form. The Electronic Document Gathering and Retrieval (EDGAR) program has evolved over the past five or six years to the point where nearly everything that is filed with the commission must be filed in electronic form. The S.E.C.'s Internet site makes it easy to search through documents filed using EDGAR: *http://www.sec.gov/edgarhp.htm*. A private company, Partes

Corporation, offers similar access to all EDGAR documents, with the added advantage of automatic e-mail notification of documents filed by companies of interest to you. More information about this free service can be obtained at: *http://www.FreeEdgar.com.*

V.   OTHER USEFUL STUFF

A.   **Travel Information.** You can (sometimes) save time and (occasionally) save money by making your own travel reservations. More travel sites are coming on line each day. Three major sites that are both comprehensive and fairly easy to use, are Biztravel (*http://www.biztravel.com*) run by a travel agency in West Virginia, Expedia (*http://www.expedia.com*) run by Microsoft, and Travelocity (*http://www.travelocity.com*) run using American Airlines' Saabre reservation system.

B.   **Free Electronic Mail.** If you don't have your own electronic mail account, or if you need a personal account to supplement your work account, there are several free e-mail services on the Internet. Three services that have attracted a lot of attention are Yahoo, Hotmail, and Juno: *http://yahoo.com*, *http://www.hotmail.com*, and *http://www.juno.com.*

C.   **Continuing Legal Education.** Don't forget PBI's Internet site, *http://www.pbi.org*. PBI's site provides a useful way to find out the latest continuing legal education course offerings and requirements.

D.   **The Public Utility Home Page.** Last, but certainly not least, is the author's Public Utility Home Page: *http://home.ptd.net/~sjrubin/pubutil.htm*. Started in 1995, the Public Utility Home Page is continually updated and contains links to most of the Internet resources mentioned in this chapter, as well as many other resources that will be of interest to utility professionals.