

THE DEATH OF TRAVEL

Online Collaboration Tools Spell the End of the "In Person" Meeting and the Beginning of Hyper-Productivity

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Bio: Seth Rowland, Esq. is President of Basha Systems LLC (www.bashasys.com). Since 1996, Mr. Rowland has been advising lawyers on how to apply technology to the practice of law. Along the way he has used collaboration tools to bring together lawyers from all over the country into shared virtual workspaces.

Synopsis: *In "The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century," Thomas L. Friedman, argues that advances in technology and telecommunications have created a level playing field between competitors that has transformed the way business (and law) is conducted. In this article, Mr. Rowland looks at how "affordable" communications and web-based collaboration tools can now enable solo-practitioners and small law practices to service clients on a global basis. In the "Death of Travel," Mr. Rowland explains how "physical presence" is optional. Through technology, ad hoc teams of lawyers and specialists can be brought together on a moment's notice with zero marginal cost to work together in virtual workspaces.*

It was 1989. I had just passed the New York bar exam. I was a litigation associate at a large New York law firm, and the firm was sending me to Orlando, Florida, to gather documents, conduct interviews with prospective witnesses and meet with some cable industry experts. I was bubbling with excitement -- my first working business trip.

Fast forward to 2007 and hundreds of business trips later. Even with active clients in California, Louisiana, Texas, South Carolina, Florida, Minnesota, Kansas, Tennessee, Nebraska, Colorado, New York, Connecticut and Iowa, to name a few, and partners in England, Australia, South Africa, Nebraska, New Hampshire and North Carolina, I rarely travel. Working from my home office in Croton-on-Hudson, New York, I use technology to reach out across state lines, across the continental divide, across oceans to do my work every day. With technology, my monthly "travel" budget is in the hundreds of dollars.

"The World Is Flat"

In *"The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century,"* Thomas L. Friedman, argues that advances in technology and telecommunications have created a level playing field between competitors that has transformed the way business (and law) is conducted. He cites how the effect of laying fiber-optic telephone cable under the ocean has reduced the cost of telecommunications between U.S. and India or China to "free".

When it was recognized that the "fiber" could be used for data in addition to talk, and that the cost of the data-packets had been reduced to "free", nothing short of a revolution occurred in China and India. Overnight, China and India changed from third-world countries to first world commercial powers.

The revolution in business communications has also reached the law. The effect is not the elevation of third world powers, but the elevation of the solo attorney or small law practice to compete on the world stage.

Armed with a web-presence that establishes your credentials in an area of expertise and in a particular state, you have the ability to service global clients who need your services.

The Technology

So where is this radical "new technology" that spells "The Death of Travel"? It is sitting on your desktop. On your left is your phone and your computer, with a high-speed connection to the Internet. Add a few peripheral devices like a noise-canceling headset and a digital camera (aka webcam) and you're ready to open your global law practice. Add some free and some subscription-based web services and you can meet and collaborate with other attorneys, experts, and clients around the world without ever leaving your desk.

Telephone Service: From POTS to VOIP

Let's start with the phone. The cost of phone service is virtually free. There are dozens of carriers offering a fixed monthly fee for unlimited local, regional, national and even international calls. You don't have to even get a new phone. POTS (or plain old telephone service) will do; so dial away.

For the more adventurous, you can get voice over Internet protocol ("VOIP") service which reduces the price even more. With VOIP, you can take your phone anywhere you can get an Internet connection and receive calls. With VOIP, everything is a local call. However, the quality of the audio varies among VOIP providers. And service outages in your broadband connection will also affect your ability to make and receive calls.

For those who wish to dispense entirely with a phone, there are free services like Skype (www.skype.com). Using a headset and a computer, you can have real-time

conversations with any of the tens of millions of Skype registered members, set up audio conferences and video calls, and send and receive documents. For 2 cents a minute, you can use SkypeOut to make calls outside the Skype network to anywhere in the world. For a nominal fee you can use Skype as your primary phone getting a "real number" and even a "real phone" that uses your office's wireless network to access the internet.

Every August, I relocate my business to a foreign location. I use Freedom Voice (www.freedomvoice.com) to route my voicemail to my email. And I use Skype to return calls to my clients. A one hour call costs me a little over a dollar.

I.M. for the Connected Lawyer

Instant messaging (or IM) has gotten a bad rap with America Online and all the kids hanging out in chat rooms. IM has evolved a long way since the late 1990s. It is an essential tool for the "connected lawyer".

IM platforms now include Microsoft Network (MSN) or Windows Live (get.live.com), Yahoo Messenger (chat.yahoo.com), Google Talk (www.google.com/talk), and Skype Chat (Skype.Com/InstantMessenger), in addition to AOL (www.aim.com). The best news; they are all free.

Through use of "friends" you can send and receive instant alerts across the globe. Jack into the internet from anywhere, and you can set up ad hoc conferences in private invitation-only chat rooms. With a head set you can talk live over the internet. And with a webcam (a camera attached to your PC via USB or sometimes built into some laptops) you can place live video calls. A tool originally designed to let "teens" send pictures to each other can be used to send legal documents to the private chat room participants to further the discussions.

Using Skype with voice and video enabled, I recently gave a seminar presentation to a number of lawyers in Sydney, Australia gathered to review the latest developments in document assembly, my prime area of expertise.

Free Conference Services

Conference calling used to be a big production. Once you mastered the use of the "flash" button on your phone you could bring in ONE additional party on a call. And for that privilege you paid a monthly supplement on your phone bill. Anything more was a big production that required advance planning.

I now use a service called GoToMeeting from Citrix Online (www.gotomeeting.com). When I set up my webmeetings (more on that later), GoToMeeting provides me a telephone number and a private access code. Up to 25 people can call into that number and pay only the cost of a long distance call (which you should remember from above is free). With GoToWebinar from Citrix Online (www.gotowebinar.com), I can have up to 1000 people on the call. With that many attendees, as you can imagine, only the presenters can talk. And the cost of 1000 people on a call to me; you guessed it.... free.

GoToMeeting® uses a service called freeconferencecall.com. Accounts are free; the calls are free. The company makes it money when you decide to offer a toll-free 800 number for the call. Other free or low priced conferencing services include InstantConference (www.instantconference.com), FreeConference (www.freeconference.com), Totally Free Conference Calls (www.totallyfreeconferencecalls.com) and Foonz (www.foonz.com).

The implications of these converging technologies are revolutionary. Send a free

instant message to your "legal friends" setting the time, phone number and access code of the meeting and in minutes everyone is on the phone meeting and collaborating for free. Well, not quite free. Someone has to make money from the call; many lawyers and specialists charge by the hour for their time.

Taking the Meeting to a Virtual Workspace

Talk is all well and good for small groups and short conversations. But visuals are better. With the coming of the digital age, most information is stored in a digital format that can be displayed, manipulated and edited on a computer. When you combine a "free conference call" with a virtual workplace you now have all the benefits of a "face-to-face" meeting without any of the calories; you know those fancy lunches and late afternoon cocktails.

Once lawyers would get together in a meeting and review documents, making notes, making changes and strategizing. The same can be now be done on a computer screen by lawyers working in different offices. It used to cost several hundred dollars for each meeting and take several days to set up such meetings. Today, it takes under a minute to set up such a meeting and send out invitations via Instant Message to your friends or via e-mail. And the cost for unlimited meetings for an ENTIRE year is measured in the hundreds of dollars.

A number of services are available at different price points. Citrix Online offers three services: GoToMyPC (www.gotomypc.com) for one-on-one meetings; GoToMeeting (www.gotomeeting.com) for meetings with up to 50 participants; and GoToWebinar (www.gotowebinar.com) for meetings with up to 1000 attendees. WebEx (www.webex.com), which started out

arranging expensive corporate meetings, now offers a service called MeetMeNow for a low monthly fee. IBM which developed Lotus Sametime for the corporate market now offers Lotus Sametime Unyte (www.webdialogs.com) on a metered usage basis or a fixed fee.

Microsoft has entered the action recently with Office Live Meeting. It is part of the new SharePoint suite of products. At the moment, you need your own communications server to host meetings. Even Adobe has recently entered the fray with Adobe Acrobat Connect Professional (<http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobatconnect>). And some of the IM providers are looking into adding shared desktop capabilities to their chat services.

Hyper-Productivity

Every time I get into a car to travel to a client or a meeting, I lose money. If I do travel, I far prefer to travel by train where I can fire up my laptop and my Verizon air card and keep working. Far better is not to travel at all. While I am admittedly a workaholic, I value the time with my family and so wish to maximize the productivity of my work time.

With the emergence of low cost communications technology, there is no need to travel for work. Everything can be done from the office. I can take out 30 minutes for an adhoc webmeeting to negotiate a services contract between a lawyer in San Diego and a computer company in New Jersey: all parties on the phone, reviewing the text of the agreement and making changes in real-time. Several days of emails, drafts and discussions have been reduced to a single 30 minute call.

Lose the Calories

Once you look at the convergence of free telephone service, instant messaging, and

web-conference services, the question arises, "What is the benefit of a face-to-face meeting?" Personal meetings are important to assess the trustworthiness of your interlocutor and to establish a personal relationship. Beyond that, the main benefits are the pleasures of fancy meals, fine wine and strong spirits.

Personally, I would rather stay home and lose the calories. The convergence of technology allows me to set up meetings with specialists across the world on a moment's notice and no cost. The boost to productivity allows me to deliver higher quality services to my clients more cost effectively and in a more timely fashion. Happier clients; happy family; the best of both worlds.