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Road Warrior

How to Be a Mobile Lawyer and Avoid an Aching Back

By Jeffrey M. Allen

Let's face it; most of us are "mobile lawyers," to one extent or another. Mobile lawyers practice their profession in more than one location, which may include our offices, homes, the courthouse, a client's office, a hotel room—or even planes, trains, and automobiles. Some of us have even been known to practice from ballparks, soccer fields, and restaurants. Many lawyers who think of themselves as "office" lawyers actually practice at multiple locations, which requires that we make decisions about what tools we need to function effectively at each location. This article looks at mobile lawyering from a slightly different perspective: what weapons we need in our mobile arsenals and which tools work for what purpose at which location.

One nice thing about the times in which we live is that technological wonders allow us to pack more tools into smaller spaces and with less weight. That makes it possible to pack a case with a plethora of high-tech marvels capable of covering almost any contingency so that like good scouts, we come prepared. Take that approach and the easy answer to the title of this article is "Get a good briefcase with wheels." (The inventor of the wheeled case should probably have his or her birthday declared a national holiday.) But there may be an even better answer: selective choice of tools.

Certainly, each of us will want an individualized "ultimate" mobile kit. This ultimate kit will vary, just as our particular needs vary. Having an assortment of tools that allows us to work productively in any environment in which we expect to find ourselves practicing is a great first step. Selecting the right tools to take with us at any given time becomes the step that allows us to work effectively and travel light at the same time.

For example, my personal arsenal includes a couple of laptop computers, an LCD projector, wireless communicators with Internet connectivity, cell phones, a Palm IIIc, several scanners, a printer, a couple of GPS devices, a whiteboard transcriber, digital still and movie cameras, and digital recording devices, plus a wide variety of connection cables, wires, and implements and, for good measure and the sake of tradition, a pad of notepaper and a pen (the original toolkit for the mobile lawyer). Having this collection of gear, along with several other things that I occasionally throw into the mix, makes me feel capable of doing work almost anywhere. That does not mean that I carry the entire arsenal with me everywhere (or anywhere) I go. *Remember: Tools can help you function on the move or at multiple locations, but the more that you carry at any one time, the less mobile you become.* Even today, each tool takes up space and adds weight. Every tool that you carry that you don't use adds dead weight, makes it more difficult to get around, and means you should have left it at the office.

If you are going to do a presentation for a client or at trial, you may need to have an LCD projector. Otherwise, even a small and lighter weight one is unnecessary. If you plan on doing word processing as well as the presentation and also want to get your e-mail along the way, you probably want to bring your laptop; but there are still alternatives. If your presentation is a simple PowerPoint slide show, you can eliminate the laptop by using an Iomega Foto Show; if it is just for a single client, you can also avoid the projector by connecting to a television. You can handle most e-mail through a wireless communicator, and it is possible to do word processing on a Palm device. By the time you add the FotoShow, the Palm device, and the wireless communicator together, though, you may be better off taking a laptop. The process of quickly evaluating your needs and packing the correct tools differentiates the highly effective and efficient mobile lawyer from the rest.

Some considerations worth your attention:

Word processing. If you have a significant amount of word processing, you will undoubtedly prefer working on a computer. If not, you may find that a Palm device with a folding keyboard and Documents To Go 3.0 Professional will satisfy your requirements.

Printing. If you will need to print and will not be in a major hotel, consider bringing a small portable printer with you. They are available in the \$300+ range, and some are quite decent, if relatively slow. I am particularly partial to the Canon Bubble Jet BJC-50. It is small, lightweight, and functional, and the additional cartridge insert converts it to a functional scanner. As a practical matter, I rarely travel with a printer, for several reasons. First, my work generally does not require that I print on the road. Second, if I do need to print something, I almost always have access to a printer through the hotel, another lawyer, or a friend. I often travel with a Macintosh PowerBook with a PowerPrint program that allows the Mac to use printers designed to work with Windows via a printer cable. This generally solves the compatibility issue. If I need to print and can't find a compatible printer, I can attach the document to an e-mail, and send it to someone with printer access. Even in a worst-case scenario, a fax-modem in your laptop can enable you to fax the document to yourself at the hotel.

E-mail. Most of us use e-mail heavily, and having access to it is a significant part of communicating on the road. E-mail access options have dramatically expanded in the last year or so. In addition to carrying a laptop and accessing mail at the hotel, from an office or airport, or with a wireless modem or a cell phone connection, we can now get e-mail through a variety of other means: someone else's computer, cyber cafés, Palm devices and their progeny, and a variety of wireless communications devices. AOL even offers e-mail over the telephone. If the only thing that you need is e-mail, you may be able to leave your laptop at home and carry a small wireless communicator, saving yourself several pounds of dead weight.

Presentations. Do you need a projector? Do you need a computer, or can you get by with the smaller, lighter FotoShow?

Entertainment. All work and no play create boredom every day. Somewhere along the line, we all need to take some time off and do something other than work, but heavy travel days limit opportunities for recreation. Computer games, music on a CD, or a DVD movie offer a means of bringing your own entertainment with you. Games for Palm devices have become readily available and can be entertaining. The well-equipped laptop can play music CDs and DVD movies and run computer games. If you really want to cut weight and have no cost limits, you can get a very nice, portable DVD player complete with an LCD screen that will easily fit in a briefcase or even a coat pocket.

Depending on the nature of your work and your travel, you may find other trade-offs to lighten your load. A little advance

planning can help prevent a major pain in the back!

Jeffrey M. Allen is the special issue editor of GPSolo's Technology and Practice Guide issues.

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