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Dragon NaturallySpeaking: A Change In Lifestyle

by [Andrew J. Roman](#)

March 2004

The Sizzle and the Steak

This entire article was written without touching the keyboard, through dictation using speech recognition software called Dragon NaturallySpeaking by ScanSoft. However, Dragon NaturallySpeaking is much more than merely software that replaces the keyboard. The impact of using this software in my law practice over the last decade is so profound that it can only be described as a change in lifestyle. Unfortunately, the nature and the extent of this change is not well understood. Not only by lawyers who do not use it, but by many law firm IT departments, and even by the vendors of the software themselves.

It is a cliché of marketing that "you sell the sizzle, not the steak." The developers and retailers of Dragon software appear to be selling the steak. The information they provide emphasizes technical features: the number of words in the Dragon dictionary, the minimal computer requirements to use it, the ability to dictate at X words per minute, the time it takes to dictate a document Y words in length, etc., but fails to explain the sizzle—how it changes the life of the user.

My Pre-Dragon Situation and the Situation Today

For the first 20 years, I practiced law as most of my colleagues still do today: by dictating a document using a portable dictation machine, waiting for my legal assistant to type it (before computers), or key it into the computer, correcting the first draft by pen in the margins and on the backs of the pages, and returning it to my legal assistant for re-typing or computer editing. As my practice became busier, it necessitated using more support staff time, eventually reaching 1.5 full-time assistants to keep up with the volume of work. I have been practicing for just over 30 years, and am busier than ever. Yet today, using Dragon NaturallySpeaking, I need only 0.5 of a legal assistant in a sharing arrangement. I now produce more work in less time, with a shorter time lag between the work coming to me from a client and the completion of the relevant documents. This is true whether I am in the office, working at home or on a weekend, or traveling with a laptop. That is only a quick overview of the productivity gain achieved through the use of this remarkable tool.

The Change in Lifestyle

The productivity improvement with Dragon is so remarkable that it can be compared to the difference between walking along the highway and driving along the highway, or between typing every document afresh on a manual typewriter and editing on a computer. The difference is not merely a quantitative difference in speed between manually typing at a certain speed accurately, versus talking much faster, while still being recorded and transcribed accurately. The difference is also qualitative: the human body and the brain work differently when using Dragon.

I am not a psychologist, but it is quite remarkable, once one becomes acclimatized to using speech software, just how differently we experience the process of composing and editing. There is a refreshing sense of freedom when one can dictate in whatever body position is comfortable at any given moment: with hands behind one's head, or arms folded, or hands on waist while standing and gazing through the office window from the 24th floor. The ability to be free of the keyboard and to focus and concentrate on the subject matter at hand permits far greater fluidity of thought and creativity than sitting with fingers tapping on the keyboard. Ideas seem to come faster. Getting the ideas out of one's head and onto the computer screen starts slowly, but gradually picks up momentum until there appears to be virtually no lag between thinking a continuous stream of thoughts and expressing them in writing. My wish is Dragon's command. The need to keep both hands on the keyboard in constant motion is no longer a barrier when using Dragon. As a result, producing work in this natural and more intuitive way provides for a much more spontaneous "flow," which makes any work more fun and less stressful. But this is only one aspect of the productivity improvement.

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Fewer Drafts

When using ordinary dictation equipment one does not see what is on the tape or digital memory. As the telephone keeps ringing or visitors to the office keep interrupting, the flow of thoughts is broken. It then becomes necessary to either replay what was dictated earlier, repeatedly, or to produce a somewhat rougher first draft, which then may need two or more revised drafts before it becomes smooth enough to become the final form. On the other hand, when dictating with Dragon, the words appear on the screen a fraction of a second after they are spoken. They remain on the screen to be reviewed after the inevitable interruptions. Thus, it is very easy to see what has been dictated previously, and to resume where one left off.

Also, while dictating and watching the words pop up like magic on the screen, if a particular choice of words, or organization of sentences or paragraphs appears inappropriate, it is very easy to change it on the spot. This means that the first draft will in many cases be the final draft, or much closer to it than would otherwise be the case.

With fewer drafts, a lawyer can work faster, producing more work in fewer hours. This increase in productivity benefits both the lawyer and the client.

Faster Turn-around Time

If a lawyer dictates a contract on a Friday afternoon and completes the tape after his or her support staff has left for the day, unless someone is paid to work overtime, typing of the contract will not begin until Monday morning and typically, will not be completed until later that day. By contrast, a lawyer using Dragon will have the contract completed in electronic format, printed off in hardcopy, and e-mailed to the client as soon as the dictation is completed. That is because the lawyer has eliminated using another person as an intermediary between the lawyer and the computer. The slower, low-productivity sequence of steps of talking-typing-printing (or e-mailing) has been streamlined to eliminate the extra middle step.

Similarly, a lawyer typing a contract will find it much more stressful, and much slower no matter how quickly he or she types, than to dictate it using Dragon. After all, most lawyers went to law school to learn the law— not to learn typing skills. This is no less true if the lawyer uses a cut and paste technique with paragraphs selected from other contracts used as precedents. Dragon can be used not only to cut and paste, but also can be set up to insert prespecified text (called "dictation shortcuts") from computer memory virtually instantaneously with commands such as "Insert Force Majeure Clause 3" or simply "Article 32." The same productivity gains are available when drafting litigation documents, wills, letters, or e-mails. For a small law firm or sole practitioner this can be a great productivity equalizer when competing with larger firms and their larger teams of lawyers.

The benefits to clients are also considerable. If a client needs something done in a hurry – such as an urgent injunction—it can be prepared much more quickly using Dragon. More generally, any lawyer who can provide clients with faster service than the clients are accustomed to receiving from other lawyers, will impress the clients with this superior quality of service. All clients would love to believe that even if they are not their lawyer's sole client, they are the most important. Providing the client with a large, well-written document in a short time is impressive.

Lower Costs

The cost of purchasing a license to use Dragon (especially when purchased in bulk) is very modest in comparison to the time saving obtained from using it. Typically, one or two extra hours of billing time will cover the cost of purchasing the software. However, an experienced Dragon user should be able to save at least 50 percent of the former level of legal assistant or law clerk costs without increasing the use of lawyer time spent on a task. That is a considerable saving.

In addition, the way one uses a legal assistant's time with Dragon is entirely different. Rather than using a legal assistant as merely a typing machine to operate the keyboard—a rather boring way for most people to spend their day—a Dragon user will be able to train and use a legal assistant for more meaningful and valuable administrative tasks. Delegating these tasks gives the lawyer more time to practice law, to attract more work for the firm, or to spend more time with one's family.

Another important saving flows from the fewer drafts and the faster turnaround time mentioned earlier. Certain tasks which are billed at a flat rate become much more profitable when the lawyer hours required to complete that task are reduced by 35 to 50 percent with equal or better quality. When work is billed on an hourly basis, the increase in productivity permits an increase in the hourly rate, which enables the lawyer to capture some of the productivity gain while still giving the client a finished product sooner, and at lower cost.

Self-sufficiency for the Lawyer

Dragon ends the near-total dependency on someone else to produce one's work. This is a particularly important form of empowerment for lawyers who are non-typists, or are not very computer-literate. A person who cannot operate a mouse or open an email will probably not become an instant whiz at Dragon, but the ability to dictate to a computer will probably help even the most serious computer-phobe to become modestly functional much more quickly.

Having Dragon in a home computer or laptop provides even greater self-sufficiency. Rather than trying to find someone to work overtime at night or on weekends, the lawyer simply turns on the home computer and dictates to it. Rather than hand-editing a document by pen, then returning to the office and waiting for it to be typed, the lawyer

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can create and revise the document at home using Dragon, and e-mail it immediately to other lawyers, or to the client, and to the office for filing.

Why Doesn't Everyone Use Dragon?

There is no single answer to that question. It reminds me of the days, years ago, before computers were readily available to take the drudgery out of repetitive typing. To me, anyone who does not take advantage of Dragon today could be compared to a law office today insisting on using a typewriter instead of a computer. It makes no sense to remain unaware of, or to turn one's back on major productivity enhancements.

Dragon usage should be the norm today, and probably would be but for the reluctance of the profession to embrace technology. When some lawyers consider the ability to answer a few e-mails themselves as a major technological accomplishment, moving them from single finger typing to dictating straight to a computer may seem like a great leap. A second reason why Dragon use is not the norm in law firms may be due to the lack of awareness of its capabilities among law firm IT departments. In any event, I have encountered a number of myths and phobias about the software which its vendors have not been particularly effective at dispelling. Some of these would include the following.

The Software is Not Yet Mature

That was true until perhaps five years ago. Even today, Dragon is not perfect. It has some glitches and annoying features. But what is the test of maturity? I find it perfectly functional and no more problematic than most of the other software I use daily such as Word and Lotus Notes. It operates in our firm's network environment with literally hundreds of users connected to the network (although only a few use Dragon).

It Requires Extensive Training

That is no longer true. Today, the training recommended by the vendor to create an initial voice file takes approximately 12-15 minutes. That is all I needed. This level of effort is hardly onerous in comparison to the benefits. That initial voice file permits dictation with a fairly high level of accuracy. However, accuracy will be improved even further over time as the user becomes more familiar with proper dictation techniques, diligently performing ongoing error corrections, and refines the personalized voice file through gradual vocabulary customization. The software permits adding and deleting words from the general vocabulary allowing the user to include all of the specialized words and abbreviations that they use most frequently. Through features such as the Vocabulary Builder, the user can feed and analyze past and recently created documents which contain specialized vocabulary including words, phrases, acronyms, and so on. This improves recognition significantly if done regularly such as every few months.

There are also qualified persons who can help install and customize the software as well as provide one-on-one training on Dragon usage and dictation techniques. This set-up and training will save a great deal of lawyers time, provide a head start on immediate usage, and reduce the frustration of time-consuming self-learning. An experienced trainer can coach you on the nuances of this technology, which are not evident just from reading the user guide provided with the software. This cost should be built into any technology implementation budget for moving to Dragon.

It is Expensive

The software is offered in different editions (Standard, Preferred, Professional, and Legal) at incrementally higher prices. None of these is particularly expensive, and is relatively inexpensive compared to other basic software, particularly if purchased in bulk. Certainly, in comparison to the productivity enhancement and cost savings described above, the software will pay for itself very quickly, even with the cost of installation and user training.

The most expensive editions are, not surprisingly, the medical and the legal editions. In my view, it is quite unnecessary to use the legal edition, which is not special in any way beyond providing a set of legal words in the vocabulary. I have found most of these words to be obsolete or unnecessary. Even the Preferred edition contains most of the commonly used legal words and I can easily add more, if and when required, by training Dragon using the Vocabulary Editor and Vocabulary Builder features. On the other hand, the basic or introductory Standard and Preferred editions do not contain all of the useful features found in the Professional version, which permits customization, and thus, greater productivity enhancement.

The computer processor speed and memory requirements of Dragon are quite modest, such that most Windows-based computers sold within the last two years should suffice, although more RAM is always better. But it does not take a super fast, high-end computer to use Dragon.

Conclusion

For a law firm of any size, Dragon is a low cost, low maintenance investment. The cost savings and productivity enhancement are so substantial that lawyers will earn an excellent return on their investment of time and money. It is also easy and fun to use.

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