

# Ontario's Paperless Practice Pioneer



*appointed to prestigious American Bar Association technology conference planning board*

*Margot MacPherson Brewer*

The first question for Donna Neff was going to be why she thinks she is the first Canadian woman lawyer to be appointed to the American Bar Association's TECHSHOW Planning Board.

Then Neff picks up what looks like an old-fashioned fountain pen. "You need a Livescribe," she says. Neff holds up the digital pen with a built-in recorder she is using. The new-to-market pen takes notes in pixelated notebooks that timestamps what is written on the page in sync with the recording. Later, tap on the page and the recording rewinds to exactly what was said while you were writing.

The opening question was rendered moot.

Donna Neff is a solo estates, wills and real estate practitioner in Stittsville, just minutes from downtown Ottawa. She exudes enthusiasm for technology and delights in being considered a geek. Neff needs little encouragement to hold forth about how technology has changed her law practice and ultimately, her life. In fact, it is that combination of passion and practicality that led to her appointment to the TECHSHOW Planning Board.

**"work/life balance was behind her initial decision to get onboard the technology bandwagon."**

"What sold me on going paperless four years ago was the amount of time we wasted looking for documents that were misfiled, misplaced, or stored on somebody's desk," she explains. "Storage boxes full of files were beginning to pile up in my basement and I thought, if I practise for another 10 to 15 years, we are going to run out of room. Every lawyer can identify with that."

The transformation of her office didn't happen overnight, but what had previously seemed to be insurmountable obstacles eventually melted away. After researching the right equipment, software and developing office protocols to ensure compliance with the new system, Neff's office began the conversion to paperless in 2006.

Neff's successful experience with the conversion of her own office systems led to wider recognition as an expert in advising others on how to set up a paperless law office. In May 2008, she spoke at the LSUC/OBA Solo and Small Firm Conference on "going paperless." That led to her appointment as co-chair (with Dan Pinnington) of the same conference in 2009 and 2010.

Neff graduated from participant to faculty at the annual ABA TECHSHOW in Chicago by offering a law practice management session to the 2,000 or so legal technology professionals in attendance.

Neff believes it is primarily her tremendous enthusiasm for anything technology and law practice management related that ultimately led to her three year appointment on the TECHSHOW Planning Board. Her goals during her tenure are to make TECHSHOW more accessible financially and more widely known in Canada. Approximately 80 Canadian legal professionals attended the conference this year and she would like to see that number increase. "Until you come here, you have no idea how valuable it is," Neff says.

Neff has a larger agenda that motivated her to seek out the efficiencies of technology solutions in small firms. She believes greater uptake of remote access and mobility solutions have huge potential to positively transform the profession, especially for women. "Why are women not staying in law? The profession is currently not friendly to families. Technology can help with that."

For all her professional motivation Neff admits work/life balance was behind her initial decision to get onboard the technology bandwagon.

"Thanks to remote access, I was able to go to South America for a whole month in the winter of 2008. Most small firm lawyers are completely tied to their offices. For all but three days, when I was watching penguins off the coast, I was in touch with my office over the Internet. How many solo practitioners feel they can't get away from the office for an extended period of time? Well with technology, they can."



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