

NFPA's Technology Conference

NFPA hosted their first ever "Tech Institute" on July 19 and 20, 2007 in Pittsburgh, PA. As part of my paralegal role at Paul Frank + Collins P.C., I'm frequently called upon to effectively utilize our software to bring about the best result for clients. However, just when I'm confident about my grasp of technology, the field seems to evolve again: a paralegal at another firm and I get together for lunch, and I find out how differently a similar project can be handled; a vendor calls and convincingly markets "new" software that is supposed to be better than the product I'm already happy using; or I stumble upon a website that claims to be the answer to all of my case management needs.

It is in this changing technological environment that my firm "okayed" and even encouraged me in my trek to "Learn, Leverage, and Lead" (the conference's theme) in Pittsburgh. As a NFPA representative, I'm passing on a few key items, *and inviting you to contact me if you would like additional information.*

The conference surpassed my expectations in both organization and content. During the course of only two days, over 25 workshops were offered. With 3-4 workshops occurring simultaneously, it was inevitable that attendees would be able to find something on point with their needs. I was attracted to several options. Due to the recent changes in the federal rules regarding electronic discovery and my personal interest in effectively managing documents, I attended:

- The New Federal E-Discovery Rules;
- Integrating the IT & Legal Personnel Team;
- Software Roundtable;
- Trial Presentation Programs;
- E-Discovery;
- FAQ for Vendors; and,
- Educating Your Legal Team.

Between sessions, NFPA presented a wide variety of exhibitors, such as CaseMap, Clicks Document Solutions, and Summation, to name just a few. Attendees were invited to walk through the exhibit hall to collect brochures, see demonstrations, and interact with the numerous vendors. However, coming from a small state, one of the best parts of the conference was the opportunity to sit next to paralegals from around the country and think - almost at the same time: "we are way ahead of where they are," and "what a great idea, I could try that."

In NFPA's welcome message, conference representatives stated their core goal: to advance the paralegal profession by preparing conference attendees for "the increasing technological needs and requirements facing the legal profession." By providing both information and networking, as well as vendor contacts, NFPA certainly met their objective.

Although I'm swimming in new facts, the most significant items to highlight are the changes to the federal rules related to electronic discovery. In December of last year, "ESI" (electronically stored information) was deemed discoverable in federal court cases. The challenge is ESI is almost everywhere - from network servers, back-up tapes, and laptops to CDs, DVDs, PDAs, and cell phones. Production of ESI, as one can imagine, can turn a relatively small case into a mega electronic document management nightmare.

Ramifications for not adequately requesting, fully collecting, preserving internal and external metadata, and / or producing ESI may include disciplinary actions, sanctions, and even malpractice suits. In the coming years, paralegals will play a vital role in various aspects of ESI discovery, but it is likely that one of their specific charges will be to organize, process, and review the vast amounts of materials resulting from an ESI request. Conference presenters stressed the need for litigation paralegals to educate themselves about the new federal ESI requirements.

As we were wrapping up, one of the speakers quoted Bill Gates from *The Road Ahead*: "We always overestimate the change that will occur in the next two years and underestimate the change that will occur in the next ten. Don't let yourself be lulled into inaction." His sentiments seem particularly on point for the information shared in Pittsburgh.