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Technology Track – Session 8

**How to “Excel
in the Practice of Law**

Presented By:

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About the Presenter...

Bryan Sims is a shareholder and founder of Sims Law Firm, Ltd., where he concentrates his practice in the areas of commercial litigation, civil appeals, and real estate matters. He's a member of the Illinois Bar and the Northern District of Illinois Trial Bar and is also admitted to practice before the United States Supreme Court, the United State Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit, the United States courts in the Central District of Illinois, the Southern District of Illinois, and the Eastern District of Michigan. Bryan is a member of the Illinois State Bar Association, the American Bar Association, the DuPage County Bar Association, and the Will County Bar Association as well as a member of the ISBA Standing Committee on Legal Technology, where he has previously served as the chair three times and the newsletter editor for 5 years. Since 2006, he has been a member ISBA Solo and Small Firm Conference Planning Committee. He is a past chair of the DuPage County Bar Association Law Practice Management and Technology Committee. Bryan has spoken on legal technology issues at the ISBA Solo and Small Firm Conferences, Wisconsin Solo and Small Firm Conferences, for the DuPage County Bar Association, the Chicago Bar Association, the Winnebago County Bar Association, the Lake County (Indiana) Bar Association, the Lake County (Illinois) Bar Association, the International Technology Law Association, National Business Institute and at ABA Techshow. Also, he was the featured speaker at the 2014 Oklahoma Solo and Small Firm Conference. Bryan has contributed to TechnoLawyer and was recognized as the 2005 TechnoLawyer of the Year. He has also written for PDA JD and regularly wrote reviews for Law Office Computing. Bryan blogs about the intersection between law and technology at www.theconnectedlawyer.com. Before entering private practice, Bryan worked as a judicial law clerk for Illinois Supreme Court Justice S. Louis Rathje. He has also worked as a staff attorney for the Second District of the Illinois Appellate Court. He is a 1993 Cum Laude graduate of Wheeling University and a 1996 Magna Cum Laude graduate of Loyola University Chicago School of Law. While in law school, Bryan served on the staff of both the Loyola Law Journal and the Loyola Consumer Law Reporter.

HOW TO “EXCEL” IN THE PRACTICE OF LAW

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Microsoft Excel is the one program that almost all attorneys have that they never or hardly ever use. Excel is actually a powerful program that can allow attorneys to perform a number of complicated tasks quickly and easily.

Excel is an extremely powerful program that has gotten easier to use over the years. In these materials I discuss some of the ways that attorneys can use Excel in their practice to handle a wide variety of tasks.

1. Learning to Use Excel

There are innumerable ways in which you can use Excel. There is no comprehensive list of things that anyone can prepare to tell you all the things that you can do with Excel. However, there is a resource that you can consult that will figure out the best way to use Excel to accomplish a task. That resource is YouTube.

YouTube is a great resource that has thousands, if not millions, of videos explaining how to perform tasks in Excel. If you are in doubt of how to do things, don't hesitate to check YouTube for your answers.

2. Use Excel's Calculation Abilities to Automate Tasks

One of the areas of my practice is transactional real estate. A few years ago, I was representing a buyer in a real estate closing. The Seller handed me the seller's closing statement, which had been prepared on a typewriter. This was not a document prepared in Word (which would have been bad enough) but it was prepared on an actual typewriter.

There is no reason to do this when we all have Excel available to us.

Included with the materials should be my real estate Closing Statement. This template highlights one of the great features of Excel, which is to enter information once and then use it multiple times. For example, you enter the price information in one location and then you can use a formula to calculate the amounts due to each realtor, the sum owed for state tax stamps, county tax stamps, and, where applicable, municipal tax stamps.

There are two significant benefits to performing the calculations in this manner. First, by entering the purchase price only once, you know that all of the calculations are using the correct number. Second

by using a formula for each of the calculations, you know that the calculations are accurate and, consequently, that the answers are accurate.

Additionally, by using the SUM function, you can automatically total columns (or rows) and know that, if you change an entry, the bottom line will still be correct. Finally, I also use it to determine the day of the year that the closing will occur. This allows me to calculate tax prorations. I do this by taking the date of the closing and subtracting the last day of the prior year. Note that the last day of the prior year appears in cell F7. It's just in white text so that it isn't seen on the screen.

Another problem that I solve with Excel is calculating post judgment interest. I have created a spreadsheet that allows me to calculate the number of days between two dates. In this case, the judgment date and the date I am issuing the citation. I then key in the interest rate (9%) and calculate a per diem.

I can easily add in the other necessary figures, such as costs of the various postjudgment proceedings, subtract any payments that have been made (as if that happens) and calculate the total amount due for any period of time.

The real benefit to using Excel in this manner is that, once you have set up a sheet to handle a particular problem, it is very easy to perform that same task again and again, in just a fraction of the time. Without question, you can manually calculate postjudgment interest using a calculator. Further, if you are doing it only one time, you can probably manually calculate it faster than it takes me to set up a spreadsheet to do it. However, the second time around, I can be done 30 seconds after I have the numbers in front of me, and you will still be trying to figure out how many days have passed.

Another use of a spreadsheet that I will talk about is using it to keep track of funds in my IOLTA account. To do this, I set up a separate sheet for each of my clients and then link the total for each to a summary page that lets me tell at a glance what I should have in my account at any time.

The benefit of using Excel here is twofold. First, because I use automatic calculations on each client page, I know that my totals are correct. This is obviously a good thing. Second, my summary page automatically pulls the information from each of the client sheets. Again, this allows me to know that I have pulled the correct information. As long as I have properly recorded the correct amounts for deposits and withdrawals, I know that all other aspects of the sheet are correct and that that I have not incorrectly copied something when I went from one page to another.

Although most of the time our practices do not involve a lot of math, there are times when we have to use it. On those occasions, it often pays to be able to leverage the power of Excel to benefit you.

3. Leverage the Power of Formulas

One of the real powers of Excel lies within its formulas. For example, in my real estate closing statement, one of the calculations is for the state transfer stamp. In Illinois this is \$0.50 per \$500 (rounded up). Excel will allow you to write a formula to do this. My formula looks like

=(ROUNDUP(E9/500, 0))*0.5

The equal sign is how all formulas start.

The ROUNDUP command says that I want Excel to round up the next calculation.

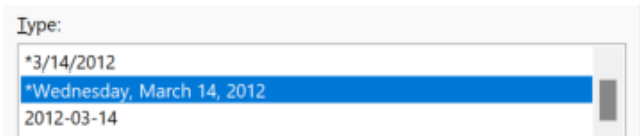
The calculation appears in parentheses. It tells Excel to take the number in cell E9 (which is the purchase price) and divide it by 500. The 0 after the comma says that there should be no digits to the right of the decimal.

Of course, the ROUNDUP command tells Excel to round the answer up to the closest dollar.

Finally, Excel multiplies that answer by .5 to determine the final cost of the tax stamps.

Another formula that is quite useful is found in both the real estate closing statement and the postjudgment interest calculator. This is the formula that allows you to subtract one date from the other, which allows you to determine the number of days between the two dates. Excel does this easily, as long as you identify each cell as a date.

You identify each cell as a date by right clicking on a cell and choosing Format Cells. On the number tab, select Date in the left column. In the right column, you can choose how you want the date to appear. For example, in my real estate closing statement, I have the date appear with the day, along with the date. Regardless of the format that you choose, you can still add or subtract from this date to generate a new date. For example, if I write the formula =C7+45 and the date in C7 is October 15, 2023, Excel will tell me that 45 days from October 15 is November 29. Alternatively, if I know we are closing on October 15 and I subtract the last day of the prior year, Excel will tell me that October 15 is the 288th day of the year.



There are two key things to remember when writing a formula in Excel. First, all such formulas start with an =. Second, when you are doing mathematical calculations, remember your order of operations from high school. If you don't recall, this is PEDMAS. Parentheses, Exponents, Multiplication and Division (left to right), and Addition and Subtraction (left to right).

4. Use Excel as an Analysis Tool

You can also use Excel as an Analysis Tool. The sample I have for this has nothing to do with the practice of law, but I found it useful. My daughter is in college in Oregon. At the end of school last year she needed to find a self-storage unit to store stuff over the summer.

In order to decide which company to go with, she put together a spreadsheet with the factors that were important to her. I have included that spreadsheet with these materials. The first sheet has all of those factors set out and then she ranked them.

Additionally, not wanting to pay for the unit on her own, she convinced several of her friends to go in with her on the unit. The second sheet has the other people on it, what they are storing, and when they are leaving and returning (names have been changed).

This may seem like a simple example. However, it gives you an idea of just some of the ways that you can use Excel.

I have also included a spreadsheet called Data for Analysis. This includes made up data about a hypothetical company that sells different types of screwdrivers.

You can sort this data by clicking the upper left-hand corner of the sheet (between Column A and Row 1. This selects all the data. Click Data in the menu bar and then click sort. This brings up a menu allowing you to sort the data in a variety of ways.

Additionally, you can also easily make graphs from this data. A great example of this is a pivot table. Select all of the data, choose insert, and then choose Pivot Chart. Choose Pivot Chart and Pivot Table and have it open in a new sheet. You can then select the data you want to analyze to find out whatever answer it is that you are looking for. Just change the Pivot Chart fields to change how the data is displayed and to control what data is displayed.

5. Conclusion

These materials just scratch the surface of the possibilities of how you can use Excel in your practice. Once you get some of the fundamentals down, the possibilities are endless. Start now thinking about how you can incorporate Excel into your practice.