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Technology Track – Session 3

Real Talk About Law Practice Hardware: What You Need (and What You Don't)

Presented By:

Jeffrey S. Krause
Affinity Consulting Group, Waterford

REAL TALK ABOUT LAW PRACTICE HARDWARE

What You Need (and What You Don't)

Jeffrey S. Krause
Affinity Consulting Group
jkrause@affinityconsulting.com

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About the Presenter

Jeffrey S. Krause is a Wisconsin attorney and a senior consultant with Affinity Consulting Group where he is a member of the Strategy team. He has spent more than twenty-five years assisting legal organizations of all types and sizes choose the right technology and use it the right way.

Jeff writes and speaks on a variety of topics related to legal technology and efficiency. He is a long-time planning committee member and a past chair of the Wisconsin Solo and Small Firm Conference and the Milwaukee Bar Association Law and Technology Conference.

In 2024, the State Bar of Wisconsin honored him with the John Lederer Service Award, which celebrates lawyers focused on improving the lives and practices of solo and small firm attorneys. In bestowing this award, the bar recognizes Jeff as exemplifying the leadership, spirit, and dedication of attorney John Lederer, who saw it as his mission to help solo and small firm lawyers master the skills and technology needed to build their practices.

Contact: jkrause@affinityconsulting.com

Program Description

Technology marketing often pushes lawyers toward expensive upgrades they may not need. Cut through the noise and focus on essential law practice hardware, with practical guidance for making smart, cost-effective technology decisions that support your work without overspending.

Learning Objectives

After attending this session, participants will be able to:

- Identify the hardware categories that actually matter once a law practice runs its software, documents, and billing in the cloud.
- Translate vague marketing specifications (RAM, processor, storage, graphics) into a concrete, defensible buying standard for a cloud-based practice.
- Evaluate docking stations, monitors, printers, and scanners against real practice needs rather than sticker price alone.
- Build a firm-wide hardware standardization and replacement plan that reduces downtime and IT cost.
- Apply a “necessary spend” framework — distinguishing purchases that are genuinely required from those that are merely available — to hardware decisions, including when the right answer is to spend more.

I. Introduction: “Necessary,” Not “Cheap”

Many law-practice technology programs are pitched one of two ways. Some push attendees toward specific and expensive options while others are a well-meaning budget talk that treats every dollar spent as a dollar wasted. Neither is right. This program — and these materials — use a third standard: spend what is necessary for the way you actually practice. Sometimes that number is lower than what the marketing suggests. Sometimes it is higher. The goal is to provide you with a way to tell the difference, category by category, rather than a shopping list to follow blindly.

“Necessary” is not a marketing word in this context — it is the word used by the rules that govern how lawyers must handle technology.

> *“A lawyer shall provide competent representation to a client. Competent representation requires the legal knowledge, skill, thoroughness and preparation reasonably necessary for the representation.”*
>
> **SCR 20:1.1 (Competence)**
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> *“To maintain the requisite knowledge and skill, a lawyer should keep abreast of changes in the law and its practice, including the benefits and risks associated with relevant technology, engage in continuing study and education and comply with all continuing legal education requirements to which the lawyer is subject.”*
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>
> **SCR 20:1.6 (Confidentiality of Information)**

Read together, these rules say two things that matter for hardware decisions specifically. First, you are expected to understand the technology you use well enough to use it competently — which means buying hardware that actually supports how you practice, not hardware you cannot configure or maintain. Second, whatever you buy has to be capable of protecting client data. A machine that is too old to receive security updates, or too underpowered to run encryption and endpoint protection without becoming unusable, is not a bargain — it is a liability. “Necessary” spending accounts for both of those obligations before it accounts for price.

II. The Cloud Changes the Hardware Math

The specific hardware guidance in these materials assumes your practice already runs — or is moving toward running — in the cloud for its three core functions:

- Microsoft 365 (email, Word, Excel, Outlook, Teams) rather than an on-premises Exchange or file server.
- Documents — stored, shared, and backed up through a cloud service (OneDrive, SharePoint, a cloud document management system, or a cloud-synced drive) rather than a local server.
- Practice management and billing — a web-based case management platform rather than a locally installed, server-dependent program.

If that describes your practice, the heavy computing — storage, backup, most processing — already happens on someone else's servers. Your local hardware's job changes: it exists to access that cloud environment quickly and securely, to display it clearly, and to keep working through the ordinary friction of daily practice (a bad Wi-Fi connection, a dying battery, a second monitor). That is a real job, but it is a smaller and different job than running a full on-premises practice from a desktop tower, and it should be priced accordingly — in both directions. You do not need yesterday's “server-in-a-box” workstation. You do still need enough machine to make the cloud experience work well, every day, without friction that costs you billable time.

One caution: “cloud” does not mean “no local storage needed.” Cloud sync clients cache files locally, your operating system and applications need room to update, and browsers and case-management apps use meaningful local storage for performance. Under sizing local storage to save $40 at purchase is one of the most common “penny-wise” mistakes in this whole category — see Section III.

III. Your Core Machine: Laptop, Desktop, or Both?

For the large majority of attorneys and staff working from a cloud-based practice, the answer is a laptop, and only a laptop. A single portable machine — paired with a good docking station (Section IV) — gives you a full workstation experience at your desk and full mobility everywhere else, without maintaining two machines, two sets of software, and two sync points. A dedicated desktop tower still makes sense in narrow cases: a fixed workstation running specialized, resource-heavy local software (litigation support databases, certain trial-presentation or video-editing suites), or a support-staff role that never leaves a single desk and benefits from the extra power-per-dollar a desktop provides. Absent one of those specific reasons, buy the laptop and skip the desktop.

What Specs Actually Matter for Cloud Access

Once you accept the cloud premise, the specification conversation gets much simpler. You are buying a machine to run a browser, Outlook/Teams, Word/Excel, a handful of cloud-sync and security agents, and video calls — comfortably, every day, for three to five years. Here is what that requires:

RAM — 16GB minimum; 32GB if you run heavy multitasking

16GB is the realistic floor in 2026 for running Windows or macOS, a browser with a dozen-plus tabs, Outlook, Teams, and a cloud-sync client simultaneously without slowdowns. Attorneys who routinely run video calls alongside document comparison tools, virtual machines, or several large spreadsheets at once should go to 32GB. RAM is one of the cheapest upgrades at time of purchase and can be one of the most expensive (or impossible) to add later to a laptop — buy ahead of your need here, not to it.

Local storage — 500GB minimum; 1TB is a reasonable default

Storage is inexpensive enough now that under-buying it makes little sense. 500GB is a workable floor; 1TB solid-state storage costs little more and gives real headroom for OS updates, cached cloud files, and the accumulation of "temporary" files that never quite get cleaned up. Remember: even a fully cloud-based practice needs local space for updates, caching, and normal operation — this is not wasted money.

Processor — a current mid-tier chip, not the flagship

A current-generation Intel Core Ultra 5/7, AMD Ryzen 5/7, or Apple M-series chip (M4 or later) comfortably handles this workload with room to spare. You are very unlikely to notice the difference between a mid-tier chip and the top-of-the-line model for browser- and Office-based work — this premium buys benchmark numbers, not a better day at the office.

Graphics — integrated is fine for most; dedicated only for specific applications

Integrated graphics (built into the processor) are sufficient to drive two or more external monitors when paired with a capable docking station — the dock, not the laptop's graphics chip, usually determines how many monitors and at what resolution you can run (see Section IV). A dedicated/discrete graphics card is worth its added cost only for specific, identifiable workloads: video editing or production, trial-presentation graphics work, or CAD/3D modeling. If none of that describes your work, a dedicated GPU is money spent without a purpose.

Example Hardware Meeting These Specs (2026)

Machine	Platform	Key Specs	Approx. Price
Lenovo ThinkPad T14 Gen 6	Windows	Intel Core Ultra 5, 16GB RAM, 512GB SSD, 2x Thunderbolt 4	$1,200–$1,400
Dell 14 Premium	Windows	Intel Core Ultra 7, 16GB RAM, 512GB SSD, up to 20-hr battery	~$1,099
MacBook Air (M4)	macOS	M4 chip, 16GB RAM, 512GB SSD	~$1,199–$1,399
14" MacBook Pro (M5)	macOS	M5 chip, 16GB RAM, 512GB SSD, Liquid Retina XDR display	~$1,599

These are representative, not exclusive — the specs matter far more than the specific model. Confirm current pricing before purchase; hardware pricing shifts throughout the year.

IV. The Docking Station: A Critical (and Often Overlooked) Purchase

If the laptop-only strategy in Section III is going to work, the docking station is what makes it work. It is the single piece of hardware that converts a portable laptop into a full desk setup — multiple monitors, keyboard, mouse, wired network, external audio — with one cable. A weak or mismatched dock is the most common reason a “good enough” laptop feels underpowered at the desk. Treat the dock as core infrastructure, not an accessory.

For anyone who regularly works from more than one location, budget for more than one dock: one at the office, one at home, and — for attorneys who travel to court or client sites regularly — a compact travel dock for your laptop bag. This is a clean example of “necessary” spending that looks like overspending until you consider the alternative: re-cabling a desk (or working without a second monitor) every time you change locations, every single day.

What to Look For

- Multiple video outputs — enough to drive at least two external monitors at full resolution.
- A mix of USB-A and USB-C ports — most offices still have a mix of older and newer peripherals.
- Wired Ethernet — a meaningfully faster and more reliable connection than office Wi-Fi for cloud-heavy work.
- Sufficient power delivery to charge the laptop through the same single cable.

Connection speed matters more than people realize. The physical dock is only half the equation; the connection standard behind it determines how much data can actually move. USB 2.0 tops out at 480 Mbps. Thunderbolt (3, 4, or the newer Thunderbolt 5) runs at 40 Gbps — and Thunderbolt 5 pushes to 80 Gbps. That's roughly 80 times faster than USB 2.0, and even a "fast" USB-C port (USB 3.2 Gen 2, at 10 Gbps) is still a quarter of Thunderbolt's bandwidth. In practice, that gap shows up as: how many external monitors you can drive at once, whether you can run two 4K displays or one 5K/6K display without artifacts, and how fast an external drive plugged into the dock actually transfers files.

Does this mean your laptop needs Thunderbolt? Yes, if you want the dock's full speed. Thunderbolt and USB4 use the same USB-C-shaped port as ordinary USB-C, so a Thunderbolt dock will physically plug into any USB-C laptop port — but a plain USB-C port that isn't Thunderbolt/USB4-certified doesn't carry the same bandwidth. Bottom line: match the dock to the laptop's actual port spec — check for "Thunderbolt" or "USB4" next to the port, not just "USB-C" — or the expensive dock won't deliver what you paid for.

Example USB Docks

Item	Notes	Approx. Price
CalDigit TS5 Plus (dock)	Drives two 8K60 or three 4K144 monitors; 10GbE; 20 total ports	~$499
Amazon Basics Thunderbolt 4 Pro (dock)	Drives two 4K60 monitors; 2.5GbE; 96W charging	~$200

Monitors

Unless you use one very large monitor (at least 30+ inches), two monitors is the practical minimum for document-heavy legal work — one for the document you are drafting or reviewing, one for email, research, or a second document. For anyone who spends significant time reading long documents (briefs, contracts, discovery), a monitor that rotates to portrait orientation is worth the modest added cost: it displays a full letter-size page top to bottom without scrolling, which is a genuine daily time-and-eyestrain savings, not a novelty.

While a portrait monitor can have great benefits, monitors of the same size and resolution may be even more important. I am not sure anyone has specifically studied this, but it makes sense and my personal experience agrees. Every time your eyes shift between two points at different distances or apparent sizes, they have to re-adjust two things simultaneously: accommodation (the eye's internal focus) and vergence (how much the two eyes rotate toward or away from each other). Mismatched monitors — different sizes, different distances, different heights — mean your eyes make that adjustment every time you glance from one screen to the other, all day long. Digital eye strain research consistently identifies this kind of repeated accommodative/vergence demand as a driver of asthenopia (eye strain).

This also means that having your monitors at the same height is critical. An adjustable monitor stand can be a worthwhile investment. Some of these stand on your desk while others clamp to the back. Personally, I have opted for small adjustable stands I found on Amazon for $15 each. I adjust the stands to accommodate the monitors and raise them to matching heights.

Example Monitor Related Hardware

Item	Notes	Approx. Price
Dell UltraSharp U3225QE	31.5" 4K IPS monitor, USB-C 140W, pivots to portrait	~$800–$900
BenQ PD2705Q	27" 1440p, rotates to portrait, flicker-free eye-care	~$400–$500
ASUS ProArt PA278CV	27" 1440p IPS, 100% sRGB, budget dual-monitor option	~$300–$400
Mount-It Dual Monitor Stand	Desktop stand. Two 13-32 inch monitors up to 17 pounds each. Full motion swivel, tilt, rotate and height adjustable.	~$50
Husky Mounts 2-Pack Monitor Riser	Approximately 15”x10” with three adjustable height settings from 3” to 6”.	~$30

V. Rounding Out the Desk: Printer and Scanner

Laser Printer

Even a cloud-first, paper-light practice still prints — signature pages, court copies, the occasional client who wants paper. A laser printer remains the right default over an inkjet for office use: lower cost per page, faster output, and cartridges that do not dry out from infrequent use. Centralize printing where practical rather than buying a personal printer for every desk; a shared, higher-capacity unit is usually cheaper per page and per year than several small personal printers.

Model	Type	Approx. Price	Notes
Brother HL-L2460DW	Mono laser, automatic duplex	~$180	Solid budget single-user option
HP LaserJet Pro 4001dn	Mono laser	$300–$400 range	Fast speed, easy setup

Scanner

The most successful paper-reduction efforts tend to use decentralized desktop scanners — one at (or near) each person's desk — rather than a single large, centralized scanner that becomes a bottleneck and a reason to let paper pile up. The ScanSnap line remains the standard recommendation for law offices: simple one-touch scanning, reliable duplex feeding, and direct scan-to-cloud/PDF workflows.

- ScanSnap iX1300 — compact, Wi-Fi-enabled, duplex. Portable but significantly slower.
- ScanSnap iX2500 — flagship; touchscreen, up to 45 pages per minute duplex, larger feeder

VI. Standardize Across the Firm

Every attorney and staff member should be working from nearly identical hardware — the same laptop model (or close to it), the same dock, the same monitor setup. Minor spec upgrades based on role are fine and expected (a paralegal doing heavy document comparison might reasonably get 32GB of RAM where a receptionist gets 16GB), but the baseline platform, brand, and configuration should be the same across the firm.

Standardization is not a nice-to-have; it is a necessary spend in itself, for three reasons:

- IT support is faster and cheaper when there is one configuration to learn, image, and troubleshoot instead of five.
- Training and onboarding are simpler when every new hire gets the same known setup.
- A firm should keep at least one spare, interchangeable machine on hand — configured the same way as everyone else's — so that a hardware failure sidelines someone for an hour, not a week. That spare is insurance, and insurance is worthwhile even though it remains unused most of the time.

VII. PC vs. Mac in a Cloud-Based Practice

Because Microsoft 365, most modern cloud practice-management platforms, and browser-based tools are genuinely cross-platform now, Mac is a workable choice for many practices in a way it was not fifteen years ago. “Which is better” is the wrong question; the real question is what tradeoffs your specific practice can live with.

Factor	Windows/PC	Mac
Cloud software compatibility (M365, practice management, browser tools)	Full compatibility	Full compatibility for nearly all modern cloud platforms
Dock/peripheral compatibility	Broad, mature ecosystem	Good via USB-C/Thunderbolt; verify specific dock support
IT support familiarity/cost	Larger pool of Windows-experienced legal IT support	Smaller pool; may cost more or require a Mac-savvy provider
Legacy or niche software (some court e-filing plug-ins, older practice management add-ons)	Generally supported	Occasional gaps — verify before switching
Upfront cost	Wide range, generally lower entry price	Generally higher entry price
Longevity / resale value	Varies by brand/model	Historically strong resale and long usable life

For a solo or small firm already comfortable on Mac, or choosing it fresh, a cloud-first practice removes most of the old technical objections. The remaining question is a practical one: do your staff, your IT support, and your specific software vendors make it easy — not whether the machine itself can do the job.

VIII. Mobility: Taking Your Practice Anywhere

A cloud-based practice is only as mobile as the hardware carrying it. Revisit the laptop specs in Section III through a mobility lens — the numbers that matter change slightly when the machine is leaving the desk:

- Battery life — look for a realistic 8–10+ hours of real-world use, not just the marketing number.
- Weight and size — under roughly 3–3.5 lbs and under an inch thick makes a genuine difference in a bag carried all day.
- Port selection without the dock — confirm the laptop itself has at least one full-size or adapter-free way to charge and connect a display when no dock is available.

Two additional pieces of mobile infrastructure round this out:

- A backup connectivity plan — a phone hotspot or a small dedicated mobile hotspot device — so an unreliable courthouse, hotel, or client-site Wi-Fi connection does not stop a cloud-based practice cold.
- A minimal travel kit — charger, a compact travel dock or single-cable adapter if you need a second display on the road, and a wired or Bluetooth headset for calls from anywhere.

IX. Where to Splurge — and Why That Is Not the Same as Overspending

Everything above is about matching spend to need. This section is the other half of that same standard: sometimes the option that costs more is the necessary one, because it removes a real, daily friction or risk. The failure mode this program is trying to help you avoid is not spending more — it is spending on the wrong things, in either direction.

Tablets

An iPad (or comparable tablet) is a genuine splurge item for many practices — not required to access the cloud, but a real productivity gain for specific work: reading and annotating documents in a meeting or a courtroom, handwritten note-taking synced to the cloud, and capturing client signatures on the spot. Whether it is worth the money depends entirely on whether that specific work is part of your practice.

Model	Starting Price	Best Fit
iPad (A16)	$349 (128GB)	Reading, light note-taking, occasional use
iPad Air (M4)	$599 (11") / $799 (13")	Daily annotation and note-taking with Apple Pencil Pro
iPad Pro (M5)	$999 (11") / $1,299 (13")	Heavy daily use as a near-laptop replacement device

Other Legitimate Splurges

The same “does it remove real daily friction” test applies to a short list of other items that are easy to dismiss as luxuries and are, for the right person, necessary:

- A better monitor or a portrait monitor for someone reading dense documents most of the day (Section IV).
- An ergonomic chair, an adjustable keyboard tray, or a sit-stand desk for anyone at a computer 8–10+ hours a day — pain from a bad setup is not a badge of frugality.
- A quality webcam, microphone, or headset for anyone doing regular video hearings, depositions, or client meetings — poor audio/video on a court record or a client call is a real professional cost, not a minor inconvenience.

The test is always the same one from Section I: does this purchase serve a real, identifiable need in how this specific person practices? If yes, the higher price is the necessary spend. If the honest answer is “it's just nicer” or “it's what everyone else has,” it is not.

Key Takeaways

- This is not a “spend less” program — it is a “spend on what's necessary” program. Sometimes necessary means paying more.
- A cloud-based practice (M365, documents, practice management/billing) changes what your local hardware needs to do — access, display, and secure the cloud — which lowers some requirements and does not eliminate others (local storage, sufficient RAM, and adequate specs still matter).
- For most attorneys, one laptop plus a strong docking station replaces the laptop-and-desktop combination — and the dock deserves as much attention as the laptop itself.
- Standardize hardware across the firm and keep a spare — both are necessary spending, not overspending.
- Mac is a genuinely viable platform in a cloud-based practice; evaluate it on staff, support, and software fit, not brand loyalty in either direction.
- Know where to splurge — tablets, ergonomics, and audio/video gear are legitimate necessary spending when they solve a real, daily problem in how you practice.

Appendix A: Quick-Reference Hardware Checklist

Category	Minimum Viable	Comfortable / Recommended	When to Splurge
RAM	16GB	16GB	32GB — heavy multitasking, video calls + document tools together, virtual machines
Local storage	500GB SSD	1TB SSD	Rarely needed above 1TB in a cloud-first practice
Processor	Current-gen entry chip	Current-gen mid-tier (Core Ultra 5/7, Ryzen 5/7, Apple M4+)	Only for video editing, CAD/3D, or similar specialized local work
Graphics	Integrated	Integrated + capable dock	Dedicated GPU — video production, trial-graphics, CAD/3D only
Docking station	Single external monitor support	Dual-monitor, USB-C/A mix, wired Ethernet	A second dock for a second location; a travel dock for frequent travel
Monitors	One external monitor	Two external monitors	Portrait monitor for heavy document/brief review
Printer	Shared mono laser	Mono laser with duplex	Color laser MFP only if color output is a regular business need
Scanner	None (phone camera)	Desktop duplex scanner (ScanSnap iX1300/iX1600)	Higher-volume model (ScanSnap iX2500) for heavy daily scanning

Category	Minimum Viable	Comfortable / Recommended	When to Splurge
Tablet	None	None required	iPad Air/Pro for regular in-meeting annotation, notes, or signatures

Appendix B: Rules of Professional Conduct Referenced

SCR 20:1.1 — Competence

"A lawyer shall provide competent representation to a client. Competent representation requires the legal knowledge, skill, thoroughness and preparation reasonably necessary for the representation."

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"To maintain the requisite knowledge and skill, a lawyer should keep abreast of changes in the law and its practice, including the benefits and risks associated with relevant technology, engage in continuing study and education and comply with all continuing legal education requirements to which the lawyer is subject."

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These materials are current as of the date of this program. Product models and pricing change frequently; confirm current specifications and pricing before purchase.