

In the early days of BYU Law, doing research meant pulling books from the shelves of the law library, taking notes required pen and paper, and submitting papers involved using the Law School's in-house copy center. The technology landscape of legal education and the legal profession has seen enormous change in the nearly 50 years that have followed, and innovations in technology continue to increase in speed and scope.

For BYU Law, innovation is not just a reality; it's a priority. Dean D. Gordon Smith has said, "I want BYU to be known as, if not the most innovative law school in the country, then one of the most innovative law schools in the country."

For over four decades, a team of information and technology experts has helped ensure that BYU Law keeps pace with innovations that impact the law school experience. We spoke to two veterans of that team about how technology at the Law School has changed during their tenure.



Four Decades of Technology Innovation at BYU Law

BY RACHEL EDWARDS

From Mainframes to PCs

In 1981 the Law School acquired its first large-scale mainframe computer: the VAX 11/750. At the time, Vance Everett was completing a year-long programming project on what would later be known as Capsoft, a legal document automation software developed by BYU Law professors Larry Farmer and Stanley Neeleman. Everett, who eventually became systems manager at BYU Law, had recently graduated with a bachelor's degree from BYU's computer science program and

was recruited to manage the VAX system.

According to Everett, the VAX (short for virtual address extension) was a superminicomputer, with less memory than today's average cell phone. "It wasn't a lot of storage for an entire law school," says Everett. "The VAX had terminals which were placed at strategic places such as secretary offices, faculty offices, and the library. That's how computing was done," he said. "In the early days my focus was on managing the VAX and verifying that backups were done properly. I would constantly be checking

that the system was up and running and meeting the needs of the Law School."

In 1991 the Law School replaced the VAX with a PC network running NetWare, a Novell operating system. Gary Buckway, then the Law School's systems librarian, who had earned a master's degree in information systems from BYU, assisted Everett with the transition.

Buckway recalls the hands-on work required in implementing the first PC network. "The VAX used phone lines that had been installed by BYU," he says. "When it came time to install the

PC network, Vance and I were up in the ceilings pulling cables. We had our own equipment, so when we needed to do any kind of modification or move things around, it was up to us. I ran cables through all the different floors of the building. Moving from the vax to the PC network was the first big challenge we faced."

An essential aspect of Buckway's job in the beginning was training users on new equipment. "Over time," he says, "we moved from floppy drives to hard drives to a server. Each system required a different way of thinking, and our job was to help everyone make the change to the new system."

Everett adds, "Back in those days the hardware was extremely expensive, and we couldn't buy enough for everyone. It had to be parceled out to those who had the greatest need. As technology prices dropped, we were able to do more. Eventually we installed servers, put PCs and Macs in different offices, and created a network."

Creating Open Dialogue

One constant Everett and Buckway have found through the years of ever-changing technology is the importance of effective communication. "A lot of technology professionals don't prioritize communication," says Everett. "They prefer to sit in a back room and program, saying, 'We know what everybody needs. We're just going to do it and make everybody use it.' Gary and I have always been the opposite. We love to stop by offices that are open and ask whether there are any technology concerns and, if so, find out what we can do to resolve them."

Another way Everett and Buckway have sought to maintain an open dialogue about technology is through the Computer Committee. "We created the committee as a focus group that included four or five faculty members and an assistant dean," says Everett. "Over the years we've held regular 'brown-bag' lunches to discuss the technology-related requirements and concerns of the faculty." These discussions have been a crucial way for the technology department to keep tabs on the Law School's needs.

Moving In-House

By the late 1990s, the Law School decided to transition to new record-keeping systems. "The systems used by BYU's main campus worked well for undergraduates but not as well for graduate programs," Everett says. "It became necessary for us to develop our own student record, admissions, and career services systems, so we went into the business of designing things."

At that time, BYU Law hired a new systems librarian, David Armond, enabling Buckway to focus on the Law School's network. Eventually he would be named the BYU Law IT manager. "Originally, most of the technology positions were run through the library, but now they operate separately," Buckway says. "Anything that relates to scanning or digitizing documents for their collections and the main card catalog is handled by the systems librarian. Our team oversees the computers and servers used by faculty and staff."

Designing an in-house system for the Law School was a game changer for the

technology department. "I could sleep at night because we didn't have to worry about outside things we had no control over," Everett says. With the changes, it became easier to manage the administrative data of the Law School. Everett explains, "Over the years, we have developed a system specifically tailored to help students, faculty, and staff get their jobs done. We want to do anything we can to make processes easier and more efficient and to help our community accomplish its goals. That's what it's all about."

A class recording system architected by the IT team also simplified processes for students and faculty. "Since the early days of the Law School, we have recorded classes—with professors' permission," says Everett. "It makes it very easy for students to be able to go back and listen to the course material." Initially, classes were recorded using cassette tapes, which were copied by the media services department and made available to students for \$1 per cassette. "When we realized we could record using computers, we did that and made the recordings available to students on the server. These are the kinds of things we learned to develop in house to help the students."

A Culture of Innovation

BYU Law's IT team, along with members of the larger BYU Law community, has anticipated the changing needs of the Law School and helped create a culture that supports innovative technology solutions. "Many years ago, we invested in Polycom (a large videoconferencing manufacturer) and made several of our courses Polycom capable," Everett says.

Everett credits Larry Farmer with having the "tremendous foresight" to introduce the Law School to Zoom several years before it became a mainstream tool. "When COVID-19 hit, we were very Zoom friendly because we'd been using the technology for years," he says. "All we had to do was help faculty get used to the idea that they could teach their classes via Zoom. We purchased a lot of cameras, but we already had the software in place." A supportive faculty and deanery facilitated a quick transition.

"Our team was present at the Law School full-time during the COVID-19 shutdown," Buckway says. "We needed to ensure that all the classrooms were set up for virtual instruction, and as the faculty got more comfortable using Zoom from home, we were here to provide support and manage any problems. Our students were able to move right along with their coursework."

Both Everett and Buckway retired in 2021 after a combined tenure of 76 years at BYU Law School, passing the torch to a new team of technology specialists—including David Pratt, a systems architect, and Israel Silva, a full stack developer—who will pick up where Everett and Buckway left off. Through the decades of change since they joined BYU Law, Everett and Buckway have been integral to keeping the Law School on the forefront of advancing technologies. "It's like being a carpenter," Everett says. "In order to build things, you need to have tools. Our tools are technology skills."

Buckway adds, "Over the years, we have learned how to do new things—how to adapt. That's the nature of the job."