

A busy family law firm relies on intelligent software to draft lengthy, professional-looking documents

Overview

Name: Barbara Thompson

Company: Steinberg Thompson d'Artois Rockman Summers

Industry: Law firm

Product: Corel[®] WordPerfect[®] Office



The Story

Ottawa firm Steinberg Thompson d'Artois Rockman Summers specializes in family law, providing legal services related to divorce, separation and adoption. The firm has been especially busy in recent years, keeping pace with rising demand for family-law services in Ottawa. With five lawyers, but only four legal assistants and one receptionist, the firm relies on sophisticated word-processing software to help manage the mountain of documents generated by a hectic practice. Lawyer Barbara Thompson and legal assistant Kate Harris use WordPerfect Office and find it a valuable—and intelligent—tool in their work.

The Challenge

"Family law creates far more paperwork than other legal disciplines, such as criminal law," says Kate Harris, legal assistant to partner Barbara Thompson. "Many of the original documents we produce are 30 to 50 pages long and must be revised several times as a case evolves."

Most of these documents are created from precedents—templates based on existing marriage contracts, notary certificates, cohabitation and separation agreements, and other official records. Precedents contain legal language that has been utilized successfully in previous cases, but typically are missing names, addresses and other identifying details.

Precedents can save a great deal of time and effort in the paper-intensive field of family law. Clauses, such as those pertaining to access and custody, for instance, can be readily inserted, deleted or amended without having to draft an entirely new document. Regardless of how many precedents are inserted, though, additional writing and customization is always required. So users must be able to import, export and revise precedents quickly, accurately and seamlessly.

The Solution

To use precedents efficiently, Steinberg Thompson d'Artois Rockman Summers needed a powerful, flexible word-processing application. WordPerfect has proved to be the ideal solution.

"WordPerfect is wonderful for our practice," says Kate Harris. "We can combine text from multiple sources accurately and format long documents perfectly, every time."

Harris crafts documents ranging from reminder notices and retainer letters to bank directives and notary certificates. Regardless of the task before her, she finds it a breeze with WordPerfect.

Typically, to produce a new document, she'll open the appropriate precedent, plug in names, addresses and other relevant information, and save it to a client's file. Harris appreciates the intuitiveness of WordPerfect. She simply follows the on-screen prompts and calls on the Help feature when she's unsure of how to use a particular function.

"I'm almost always able to figure it out on my own," says Harris. "When you're able to acquire skills as you perform them for the first time, I think that says a lot about the software. As a small firm, we can't afford an in-house technical specialist."

To communicate complex information effectively, Harris creates custom charts. An assets chart, for instance, describes which assets are held by each spouse, necessary to calculate the equalization or property payment.

Features such as Automatic Numbering, Justification and Grammatik help Harris ensure that each document is letter-perfect, in both content and format. She also appreciates how WordPerfect flags potential problems with spelling, yet recognizes legal terms, such as sine die and de facto. WordPerfect's easy-to-use features help reduce the cost of preparing and revising lengthy documents.

The Benefits

WordPerfect is completely compatible with other software the firm uses, such as Forms+[®], an application from DIVORCEmate Software Inc (www.divorcemate.com). Forms+ is a specialized application that generates forms for family courts in Canada. This interoperability enables Kate Harris to prepare even the most complex court document quickly.

The advantages of WordPerfect were made especially evident at a recent workshop on the latest upgrades to DIVORCEmate software.

"When the instructor explained how to create and work with files in various word-processing applications, the commands for WordPerfect always seemed to be the easiest and most straightforward," Harris recalls.

According to Harris, the combination of features in WordPerfect ensures the firm is able to meet the tight deadlines common in family law. For instance, a person typically has 30 days to respond to an application for divorce. Yet many people delay their responses, perhaps believing they can manage the procedure without legal assistance. When they do hire one of the firm's lawyers, the pressure is often on Harris and her team.

"Some clients don't contact us until a few days before the deadline, so we must work not only swiftly, but also precisely and professionally, too," Harris says. "WordPerfect never lets us down."

Due to the nature of family law, which often involves a series of offers, counter-offers and multiple rounds of negotiations, documents are amended repeatedly. This process, combined with the value of a lawyer's time, places a premium on the accuracy of each version of a document.

"It's almost impossible to get a legal document right the first time," Harris says. "With WordPerfect, it's easy to compare each version of a document and make changes until a final agreement is reached."

And once an agreement is finalized, those documents take on a whole new level of importance.

"Once the dust has settled and a case closes, all the client walks away with is a few documents after what is often a large expenditure in legal fees for the client," Harris says. "So each document we produce must be perfect, in every way."