

# The Accidental

BY ROD HUGHES

**I**t was the late 1980s. The world was different then: the Internet was not yet part of mainstream society, the Savings and Loan scandals that closed out a decade of excess had not yet occurred, legal technology was more theory than reality, and legal assistants were still working toward expanded roles. It was also a time when Doreen Garrison, a student working toward her associate's degree in legal assistant studies at Phoenix College in Phoenix, was entering the legal workforce. Her first job, while pursuing her degree, was with a sole practitioner who specialized in personal injury and medical malpractice. Technological skill was not, at that time, the priority for most employers when hiring. Most simply wanted well-trained, capable, legal professionals who offered a measured analytical ability and a healthy dose of professionalism to accomplish the tasks at hand. That was what Garrison had been trained to do.

Flash forward to 2002. Most legal professionals now struggle to remember their work lives before the Internet and other life-altering technologies. The Savings and Loan scandals of the late '80s and early '90s have become the stuff of legend. Law firms and legal departments in the United States are finding ways to incorporate various technologies in order to remain competitive in a more techno-savvy legal environment. Technology has become a

## How technology altered the career



*From left to right: Doreen Garrison, Mike Hahn, Dan Bowen, Andrew Carpenter  
Photos by Dan Delaney. Two D Photography*

# Technologist

path of a former computer novice.



vital job skill. And legal assistants like Garrison continue to prove how invaluable paralegals are to the legal environment. Garrison, for instance, no longer handles case matter scheduling or drafting of documents. She has gone from being a technical novice with no formal training in legal computing to managing training and client services at Verdict Systems, a legal software company specializing in electronic presentation solutions based in Tempe, Ariz.

The technological revolution not only altered the legal, business and social landscapes of society, but also completely reshaped the manner in which professionals perform their work. For Garrison and many like her, it was the beginning of an expansion of opportunities.

“Initially it’s (technology) a scary thing. It’s unfamiliar territory and anything unfamiliar can be scary,” Garrison said. “But I don’t think there is any way to get around technology. Putting your head in the sand when things are changing doesn’t do any good. I simply had to change with the environment I was in,” she explained.

But even Garrison admits, the change that brought her to embrace technology was a slow process. A series of high-profile, intense cases led her to discover how vital technology was becoming in the legal industry, and started her on her path from novice to technical expert.

## The Awakening

Near the close of the 1980s, Garrison was working as a paralegal with Morrison & Hecker in Phoenix. She had been assigned to a case that would offer her an opportunity to play a role in history while also nurturing her technology skills.

Her firm's client was the Resolution Trust Corporation (RTC), the receiver for a company called Lincoln Savings and Loan Association, which had gone bankrupt in 1989. The failure of Lincoln, along with its parent company, American Continental Corporation and CEO, Charles Keating Jr., drew national attention and rocked the financial world.

"People were flying in from all over the country to review documents," Garrison said. As Garrison related the story, without the use of advanced technology, producing the necessary

documents would have been nearly impossible given the size and scope of the case.

Garrison and other paralegals were put to task on coping with thousands of documents, carting those documents back to the firm's Phoenix office, then coding them into a huge database so everyone in the Phoenix office, along with other branch offices around the country, could readily access all documents related to the case. Suddenly, without formal training, Garrison and her co-workers were being relied on to create and manage a number of critical computer databases responsible for organizing and cataloging documents for an enormous litigation matter as well as establishing tickler systems to keep track of deadlines.

At the time, it was the largest piece of commercial litigation in U.S. history, involving more than 51 million pages of documents, more than 600

depositions and more than 300 court hearings. In the end, the case was settled out of court, and Morrison & Hecker collected nearly \$300 million for the client over time and coordinated dozens of related criminal and administrative matters.

For Garrison, it meant nearly four years of hard work that involved an entire warehouse of documents. It was, in her opinion, a daunting task.

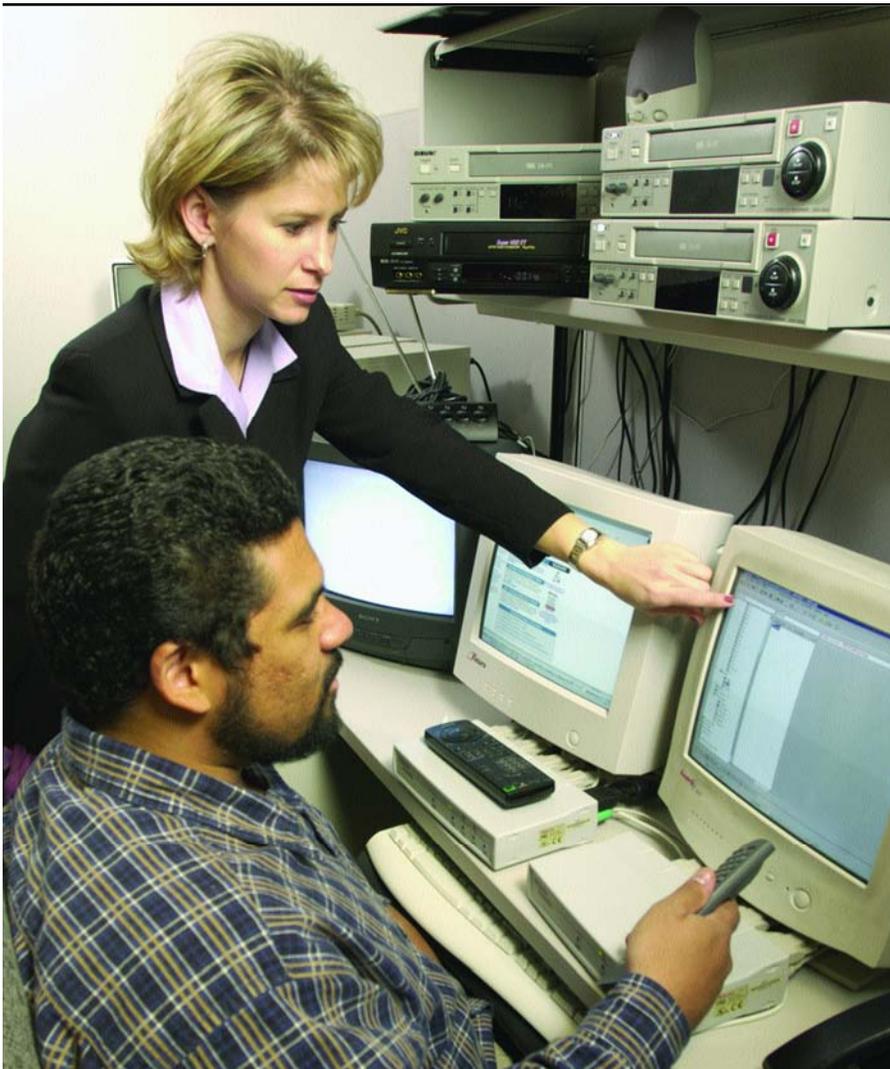
"We had so much information and we needed a way to get at it quickly," Garrison explained. "Technology helped us sort it all out. That is kind of what got me really interested in the technology field."

After creating a number of legal databases at Morrison & Hecker, Garrison joined the Phoenix law office of Steptoe & Johnson in the mid-1990s, where she worked for five years. Throughout her employment at both firms, Garrison had come to recognize the growing importance of technology to the law office, and to the paralegal community in terms of job growth opportunities. Without the databases, calendar systems, document management programs and the invention of Optical Character Recognition (OCR) software, the increased ease with which litigation matters are now handled might not exist. As such, she made it a point to continue her education by taking technology classes at community colleges in her spare time to learn more about databases, hypertext markup language (HTML), spreadsheets, PowerPoint software and even a Visual Basics programming class.

## The Encounter

While at Steptoe & Johnson, Garrison worked on another enormous case defending accounting firm Arthur Anderson from a class action securities and professional malpractice lawsuit arising from the bankruptcy of a major Phoenix homebuilder. The case involved allegations of a more than \$50 million loss of stockholder equity and nearly four years of work before it finally went to trial.

For six months during the Anderson trial, Garrison said she shared a small closet-sized office with Mike Hahn, an outside computer consultant who was helping the firm establish databases for the case. The two worked closely in sorting through and



Photos by Dan Delaney. Two D Photography

organizing computerized documents for trial. The endeavor seemed to validate Garrison's earlier recognition of how technology was influencing and altering the legal landscape.

As Garrison said, she was learning that while information is the lifeblood of litigation, it's utterly useless if you can't find what you need — and technology facilitates that discovery process with exacting efficiency.

The experience also provided a great contact in the world of legal computer technology, as Hahn went on to become a partner in Verdict Systems.

## The Fortunate Detour

Before she left litigation completely, however, Garrison still had another detour to take as she continued to satisfy her technical palate.

With her work on the Anderson case concluded, Garrison shortly thereafter left Steptoe & Johnson and began working at Brown & Bain in Phoenix as a litigation software support coordinator. The firm used Sanction software, which happened to be Verdict Systems' flagship product for organizing courtroom documents. Garrison quickly adapted to the program, and immersed herself in the technology behind it.

At Brown & Bain, she trained paralegals and lawyers on how to use database software and courtroom presentation software, said Nancy Suhey, director of information systems at Brown & Bain. The firm created Garrison's litigation software support coordinator position specifically for her due to her strong background in technology and courtroom presentations.

"Because she had the paralegal background, she knew exactly what the paralegals in our firm wanted from the technology," Suhey said. "People who have just a technical background don't always know how to apply it to the legal field. Doreen could also see down the road and see what new technologies were needed."

Through her work at Brown & Bain, Garrison said she became reacquainted with her old officemate Hahn, along with many of those he worked with at Verdict Systems. Garrison was in regular contact with Verdict Systems as the firm and the software company worked together to find new ways for the Sanction product to benefit the firm's clients.

"It was a very friendly relationship. Brown & Bain worked together very well with Verdict," Garrison explained. When the still relatively new company needed to bring someone on board to handle training and customer service, Hahn said he immediately thought of Garrison. According to Hahn, her background was a perfect fit for Verdict Systems. Garrison had worked in the legal field for more than 12 years. Her work included a variety of cases with an emphasis on complex, commercial litigation, and her experience working with a number of firms gave her an excellent education

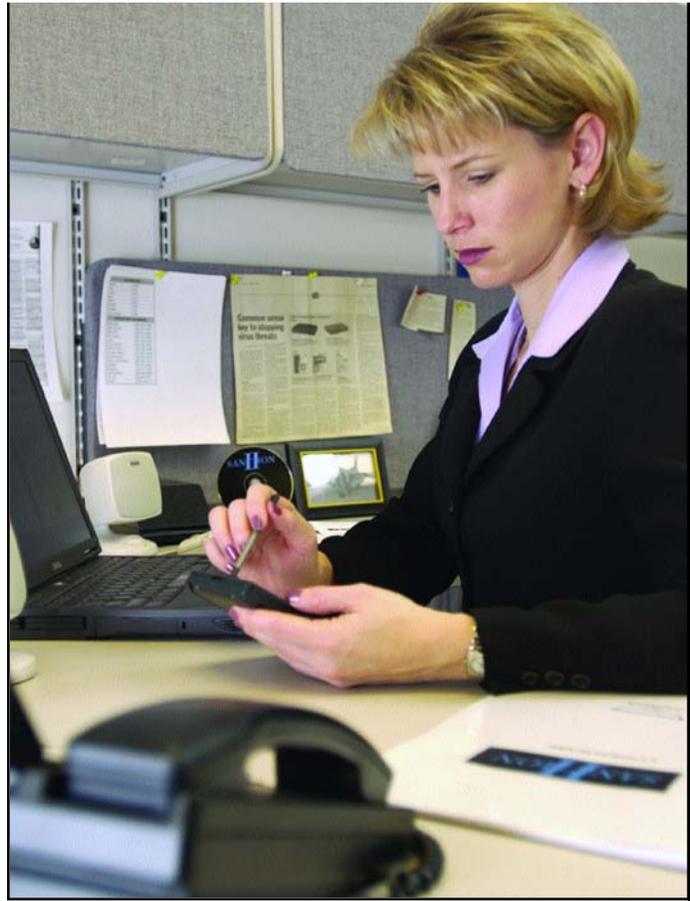
in the divergent styles of different firms. Since her responsibilities involved a combination of paralegal duties and litigation technology experience, Hahn said he saw her as ideal for what his company was seeking.

Garrison admitted that while her time with Brown & Bain was relatively brief, it was difficult for her to leave. She said she had quickly come to love her tailored position, and enjoyed the people with whom she worked.

Yet Verdict Systems offered a number of attractive opportunities in the computer world, she explained. It's proprietary product, Sanction, is trial presentation software. It allows users to load all their documents, pictures, video depositions and transcripts, and any other demonstrative evidence onto their computers and use a Windows Explorer-like program to present them through a projection system.

"It's a dynamic environment. It's constantly changing," Garrison said of Verdict Systems.

"I have a strong belief in the product. Without that [belief], I don't think I would have made the move. By nature, most paralegals are very conservative, including me."



Photos by Dan Delaney. Two D Photography

In March 2001, Garrison joined Verdict Systems. Today, as she manages training and client services for Verdict Systems, she is responsible for helping clients manage electronic evidence and develop digital presentations at trial — including her former employer, Brown & Bain.

She learned all about the software on her own and she seemed to be the perfect candidate to teach others how to use it, according to Dan Bowen, Verdict Systems director of operations.

"We also didn't have anyone on our staff that was a lawyer or a paralegal," Bowen said. "She brings a tremendous amount of credibility to us. She brought invaluable experience to us."

## The Paralegal Edge

Although everyone at Verdict Systems has worked with the legal profession for years, Garrison is the only one to come from a law firm, according to Hahn. She draws on her past experiences to make the training for Verdict's software more applicable to its clients. As a team player, she also helps out in technical support, consulting, marketing,



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software development and sales when the need arises.

"Doreen's legal experience gives us an edge," Hahn explained, noting that Garrison's insight into complex litigation and the manner in which a law firm traditionally works from the paralegal perspective is an invaluable tool in properly designing features for the company's clients. "Doreen brings a fresh perspective to the software design process. Rarely a day passes without a new feature suggestion from Doreen."

"Paralegals tend to be jacks-of-all-trades in a lot of ways," Garrison said. "What I bring to the table is the user's perspective, which can be extremely valuable to those working strictly on the technical side of things. I offer suggestions for how I think things should work." From that vantage point, Garrison regularly makes suggestions for different or improved software features, as well as explaining certain processes paralegals are usually charged

with in a law firm. By relating these processes as she herself has performed them, Garrison is able to influence the approach Verdict Systems takes toward addressing its client's needs.

Drawing from her legal expertise, Garrison has even made suggestions to improve Verdict Systems' Sanction software that includes areas such as code design and product layout to make it more user friendly, Hahn said.

When the company was designing Sanction II, which was released in July 2001, Garrison was given the opportunity to sit with the designers to discuss her views on how the program should work. "I sat with the developer and gave suggestions and ideas for what I thought the users expectations would be. Mostly, I discussed objective coding of the data — the design of fields, program layout, functionality, report writing features. If our clients are going to use this program to manage entire cases, what would they need from us?" Garrison said.

"Doreen was extremely knowledgeable about the software and she was very courtroom savvy," said Keith Perkins, an attorney and president and founder of the Never Again Foundation, a Mesa, Ariz. nonprofit organization that offers legal services to battered women and children.

A few weeks before a recent big trial, Perkins said he spent several days "camped out" at Verdict Systems, and Garrison, along with other staff members, showed him how to present trial evidence most effectively using high-technology tools. Perkins had never used the software in a trial.

"I was under huge time constraints," Perkins said. "They put together a crash course for me."

The trial was a civil suit bought by a battered wife against her husband, who had already been convicted of aggravated assault during a criminal trial and was serving a 13-year prison sentence at the time.

"It was a multimedia presentation of video, audio, photographs, 911 transcripts," Perkins said. "It brought the trial to life for the judge and jury."

Perkins won the case, and a \$1.2 million judgment against the husband, preventing him from collecting half of his wife's estate during the divorce.

"Doreen, along with the others, [was] really helpful and friendly," Perkins said. "We worked out the layout of the presentation system. They were fantastic," Perkins noted.

Since launching the software in July 1999, Verdict Systems has sold more than 2,000 licenses for Sanction to 300 law firms across the country, Hahn said. The privately held company with five employees had sales of more than \$1 million in 2000 up from \$200,000 in 1999.

## The Student as Teacher

Today Garrison speaks to other paralegals and encourages them to start exposing themselves to technology and not to shy away from it.

"Technology opens up tremendous opportunities in anyone's career," Bowen said. Even before Garrison joined Verdict Systems she had a strong reputation in the legal community as an extremely sharp and technologically gifted paralegal, Bowen explained.

"She had done some work on massive litigation. She's an incredible paralegal and she has no fear of technology. She gets involved in the technology and she isn't afraid of it," he said.

Garrison is also hyper-attentive to detail and engrosses herself in technology education, he explained.

"She wants to know how everything works and how to fix it if something happens," Bowen said.

In fact, Bowen is so impressed with Garrison that he said he believes she is among the legal technology field's visionaries.

"Faster, smaller, cheaper and easier," Bowen said. "That is the real beauty of why we had an incredible focus on Doreen. She always saw it coming. Technology became a daily part of her career." ■

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