Computer Literacy: How do Sydney Lawyers Rank?

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T his article details the results of a short survey performed in October 1990. The survey focused on the use of terminals and personal computers by lawyers and was sent to a selection of the larger firms in Sydney. It asked for information on the size of the firm, the number of lawyers with workstations (either terminals or personal computers), and the applications most used by those lawyers.

Replies from 11 firms, representing 1359 partners and solicitors were received. Unfortunately the sample is too small to draw firm conclusions about the use of computers by lawyers generally. Nevertheless the survey results are an interesting indicator of the use of computers by lawyers in medium to large firms in Sydney.
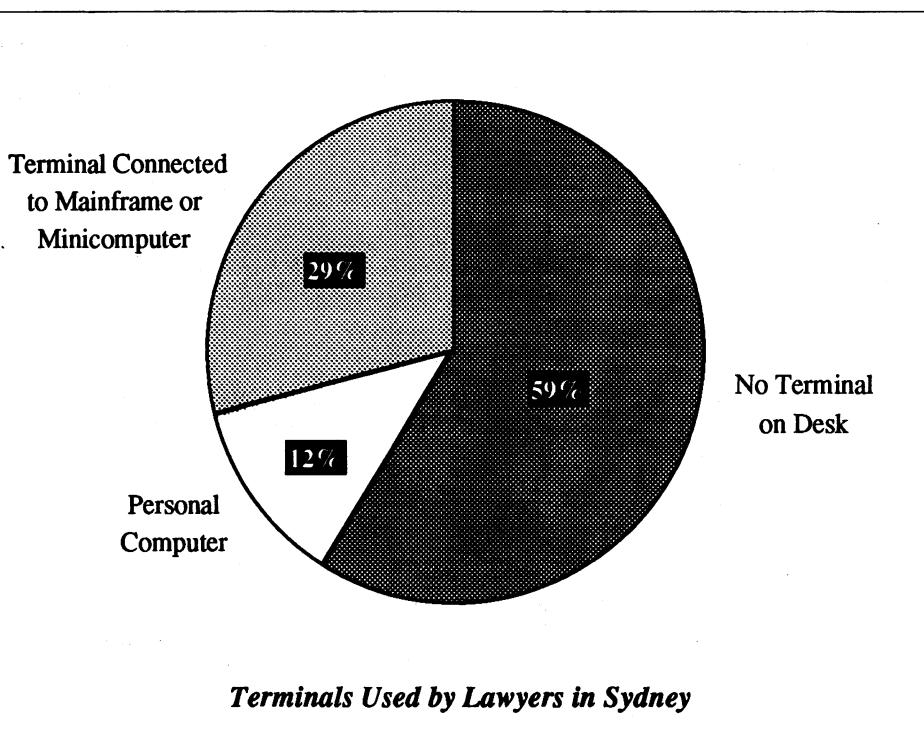
Of the 1359 Lawyers, 395 (29%) have terminals on their desk connected to a minicomputer or mainframe, and 169 (12%) have personal computers on their desk, giving a total of lawyers with terminals or computers of 42%.

For individual firms, the proportion of lawyers with terminals or computers ranged from a low of 0% to a high of 93.75%. The median firm proportion was about 36%. The firm with 93.75% was well above the other firms, with the next highest proportion being less than 70%.

It is interesting to compare the results of this survey with the results of a survey conducted of law firms in the US, reported in the National Law Journal [Staudt and Hwang (1989)].

In Sydney, lawyers predominantly use terminals (29%) rather than personal computers (12%), compared to the US survey which found that in 1988 the number of microcomputers installed was almost equivalent to the number of terminals, and the use of microcomputers was increasing. Of the firms surveyed in Sydney, at this stage only two have a significant installed base of personal computers.

There will however be a swing toward personal computers in the next one to three years. Two of the firms, including one of the firms with no lawyer workstations,

Terminal Connected to Mainframe or Minicomputer — 29%

Personal Computer — 12%

No Terminal on Desk — 59%
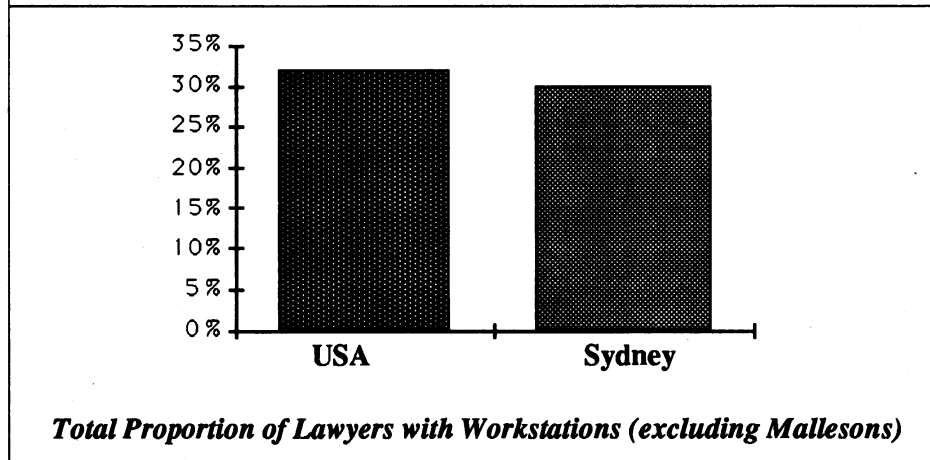
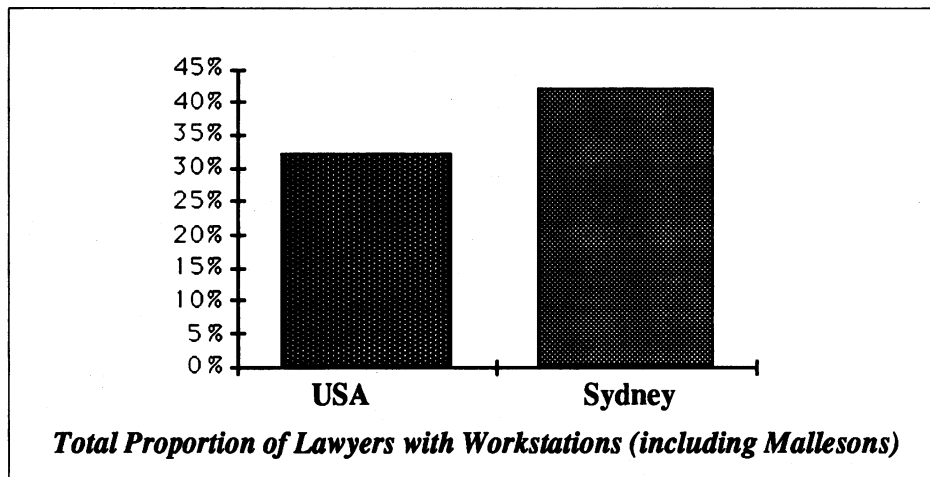*Terminals Used by Lawyers in Sydney*

intend to install a significant number of personal computers for lawyers in that time.

The total proportion of lawyers with workstations is, at 42%, well above the proportion in the US survey of 32%. However, the results of the survey may be distorted by the inclusion of Mallesons Stephen Jaques, a large firm which has made a unique commitment to terminals on almost all lawyers' desks. If Mallesons are excluded from the survey, the proportion of lawyers with workstations in Sydney is 30%, slightly less that the US survey.

The survey was limited to a small number of medium to large firms in Sydney. Hence it most likely overstates the use of workstations, and particularly terminals, by Australian lawyers. This is because larger firms have the resources to commit to technology earlier than smaller firms. Given the Law Society estimate that only 13% of small firms or sole practitioners use technological assistance [Betar(1990)], the use of workstations by Australian lawyers generally would be much lower than in the US.

The firms were asked to indicate the major application areas for lawyers use of computers. The overwhelming "favourites" were word processing and electronic mail, followed by practice management functions, including accounts and time sheets, and legal research. All firms with lawyers using computers reported that a wide range of other applications were also being used.

Total Proportion of Lawyers with Workstations (including Mallesons)

Total Proportion of Lawyers with Workstations (excluding Mallesons)

References

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