

Long Island Business News

(5/10-16/02)



KING AND HIS COURT: DOAR wunderkind Nick Croce and his firm's digital docket.

By ROSAMARIA MANCINI

If practice makes perfect, then a high-tech mock courtroom in Lynbrook that allows attorneys and judges to get comfortable with cutting edge equipment and techniques may have bright prospects.

DOAR Communications Inc. plans to open its new Digital Court Facility June 6.

The complex, financed in part by \$2.85 million in industrial development bonds through the Town of Hempstead, is designed for a new generation of tech-savvy lawyers and jurors.

The sleek, 1,305-square-foot courtroom is equipped with cameras for videoconferencing, webcasting and recording; flat panel display monitors for the judge, jurors, counsel and witnesses; Internet access and a wireless touch screen operates all the technology.

"The market was asking for this because you can't get into courtrooms to test new technology," said Nick Croce, DOAR's president. That means attorneys no longer need to set up shop in hotel rooms to test their latest trial gadgets.

Attorneys from New York, New Jersey and Connecticut have already signed up to use the facility, which also includes three mock jury rooms, three conference rooms and an executive board room – all designed as carbon copies of actual courthouse facilities.

The company didn't sacrifice aesthetics to cut costs. "We went with leather instead of pleather for the chairs, and we put custom wood paneling all around instead of just key places," Croce said. And security is exceptionally tight. Rooms are protected by key card access and video surveillance catches visitors' every move. The DOAR employees who have access to sensitive legal data have all had background checks.

The cost to use the facility reflects these refinements - \$3,000 per day for the entire complex, or \$1,500 for just the non-courtroom areas. Meals are included.

"Yes, it's expensive, but the costs will come down as more are built," said James Wicks, a litigation partner at the Uniondale-based law firm of Farrell Fritz. But he added that in certain cases it's worth the expense in order to better serve clients.

Joseph J. Ortego, a partner in the Garden City-based law firm of Nixon Peabody, met with DOAR officials last week to discuss use of the facility and services.



"It's a great tool," he said. "If you have complex techniques, you need to rehearse them. The second time you do something always works out better."

The development of digital courtrooms is driven by demographics, according to Ken Rosenblum, the assistant dean for student affairs at Touro Law Center. He said today's law students and jurors were raised on the Internet and are accustomed to reading text on a computer screen.

"The jury pool is changing," Ortego said. "They expect the graphics."

David Yellen, dean of Hofstra Law School, feels the same way. "Our students who study litigation are being trained in this technology," he said, though he added that they'll never entirely replace good oral communications skills.

DOAR, which means "post office" in Hebrew, was founded in 1989 by Samuel H. Solomon, the firm's chairman and CEO and a leading authority of courtroom presentation

technologies.

The company is divided into two divisions: court technology and litigation support/trial services/digital court. The court technology division provides IT for evidence presentation and courtroom communications in federal and state courthouses.

The other division covers document imaging, animation, jury research, electronic evidence management as well as the digital court.

DOAR is one of three federally-contracted vendors that provide and install technology in courthouses. It has installed high-tech equipment in over 300 courtrooms nationwide, including 12 New York State courts and the U.S. District Court in Central Islip.

The company has about 140 employees and a smaller office in Nevada. Croce said annual revenues exceed \$20 million, but he declined to be more specific.

DOAR isn't the first to develop a high-tech courtroom.

In 1993, the College of William & Mary School of Law in Virginia and the National Center for State Courts unveiled Courtroom 21, which at the time was considered the world's most technologically advanced courtroom.

But Rosenblum of Touro Law Center said the technology is developing rapidly. He added that when the law school completes its planned Central Islip building it will house at least one "courtroom of the future."

On the other hand, new technology probably won't ever replace oral communication or other traditional courtroom techniques.

John McEntee, one of the two attorneys at Farrell Fritz who represented the parents of murdered police officer Edward Byrne, said he "didn't use any of these high-tech aids and we were still successful" in winning a \$100 million verdict.

It's not as if McEntee is anti-technology. He's the chair of the technology committee at the Nassau County Bar Association, and he's used DOAR in the past. But he stressed the use of high-tech equipment will always depend on the specifics of the case.