

Top New Features for Lawyers in macOS Sierra

Benjamin Whetsell — October 3, 2016

With macOS Sierra – the latest version of the operating system that powers Apple’s Mac computers – Apple has introduced a number of new features that are especially useful for lawyers. Here are the highlights.

Siri

The voice-activated virtual personal assistant first introduced on iPhone in 2011 makes its Mac debut in macOS Sierra. A lot of the things Siri can do will be familiar to iPhone and iPad users (asking “Siri, what can you do?” will get you a good list): You can set up reminders (“Remind me to call Bill when I get to work”), manage your schedule (“Set up a meeting at 9”), get directions (“Where’s my next meeting?”), and more. But Siri on Mac has two features that busy lawyers will appreciate.

One is multitasking. Due to a number of factors – the relatively small displays in the case of iPhone, iPad, and Apple Watch; the inherently different way we interact with TVs in the case of Apple TV – when you use Siri on other Apple devices, that’s all you can do. With Siri on Mac, you can use Siri while you do other things. For example, while you’re finishing a time-sensitive document, you can make Siri send a message to a colleague by saying something like “Tell Jen I’m almost done.”

Another is Siri’s integration with Finder (Mac’s app for finding files). Other Apple devices don’t have a user-facing file system, so the ability to, for example, find things you’ve been working on recently by saying something like “Show me the documents I looked at yesterday” is quite new.

Siri is by far the most notable addition to Mac. With the arguable exception of text entry by dictation, this is the first time that people will be able to interact with a Mac simply by talking to it.

Universal Clipboard / Shared Desktop and Documents

A number of recent innovations in Apple’s operating systems aim to break down the barriers between your devices and your work. For example, with Handoff (introduced in 2014), you can start an email on your iPhone, and then finish it on your Mac (and vice versa) – the device you’re working with isn’t the emphasis, rather your email is. With Calls and Messages on Mac (also introduced in 2014), you can receive calls and text messages on your Mac instead of your iPhone – again, the device isn’t the emphasis, rather the person who’s trying to reach you is. Two features of macOS Sierra further break down the barriers between device and work.

One is Universal Clipboard. With Universal Clipboard, you can copy content on one device, and then paste it on another without resorting to kludgy workarounds like emailing it to yourself. So, for example, you can copy some important contract language

or a critical case citation on your iPhone while you're on the way to the office, and then paste it in a document on your Mac when you get there.

Another is the shared desktop and Documents folder. The desktop often serves as a holding area for files as they come in – and then you get busy and your files stay there until there's no more room, so you move your files to your Documents folder to make room, and then this process repeats. With macOS Sierra, files on your desktop and in your Documents folder can be synced across your other devices (including other Mac computers). The idea is that you can work with any of your files on any of your devices without spending any time even thinking about your computer's file system.

Tabs

The amount of time that lawyers spend dealing with only one thing is probably close to zero, so anything that makes it easier to do many things at once is good. In macOS Sierra, Apple has taken tabs – a longtime staple of Safari and most other web browsers – and extended them almost across the entire operating system: Pages, Numbers, Keynote, Maps, Mail (while full-screen), and many third-party apps can now show multiple documents (or maps, or messages) in tabs within a single window.

Mail Filtering

Email is probably best characterized as a useful technology that's evolved into a necessary evil. It's certainly expected to do too much (brief messages, long messages, sending files, tracking orders, resetting passwords, and more). A number of academic researchers have found a correlation between frequent email checking and increased overall stress. Even so, email doesn't seem to be going away anytime soon. Message filtering in macOS Sierra's updated Mail app helps deal with the email mess.

Filtering messages in Mail is easy. There's one button to turn the filter on or off, and one menu to choose what the filter does. The ways you can filter messages are tailored to tasks that are often grafted onto emails. For example, you can show only flagged messages for a quick and dirty to-do list, or only messages with attachments for a wordy approximation of Dropbox.

To be sure, you can kind of get to the same place in earlier versions of Mail by using Smart Mailboxes, and Windows users have had email filtering since at least Outlook 2007 – but with your choice of a Search field, the Search ribbon tab, the Advanced Find dialog, the Filter dialog, or an elaborate query syntax, email filtering in Outlook can be hard to figure out. Apple's new approach to email filtering – one button, one menu – is far more straightforward.