



Alternatives to Adobe Acrobat PDF programs

Now that Adobe has made the PDF programming code “open source,” lawyers have a choice of more affordable PDF programs.



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In previous articles, I mentioned that in federal courts electronic litigation is now mandatory. [Side note: the federal program is officially known as “ECF” or “electronic case files.”] The ECF program requires that you submit papers, pleadings and communications in Adobe PDF format.

In other words, if you intend to litigate a federal case, all documents submitted to the court, whether a filing or an ex parte letter to the court, must be in PDF format. You cannot submit documents in other formats, such as Word or WordPerfect unless the court orders you to do so.

The purpose of this article is to discuss the critical features that you need in software to *create and manage* PDF documents. In addition, I will discuss software programs from A-PDF, software I have tested and determined to be a great alternative to spending \$450 for Adobe Acrobat Pro.

Why PDF?

It is all quite simple, really. Over time, individuals and businesses needed a program to create and view documents in a standardized format. In the old days, PDF *creation* software didn’t do much beyond converting a document into PDF format. As these programs became more sophisticated, PDF creation software contained more and more features. Current programs allow PDF files to be converted, resized, edited, managed and even made secure (controlling who can view or print PDF files.)

History of PDF

Those of you who can talk the computer tech talk at cocktail parties know that “PDF” is an acronym for

“portable document format.” Adobe developed the PDF format in 1993, which is ancient history in computers. Back then, it was an obscure format that few people used. It did not help that Adobe made the programs extremely proprietary or closed source, meaning that you had to use Adobe to create and view PDF documents.

Being closed source, competing companies could *not* develop software alternatives to Adobe’s expensive Acrobat PDF creation software. However, in the last few years Adobe made the PDF programming code “open source” which gave competing companies the opportunity to develop and sell alternatives to Adobe Acrobat.

What caused Adobe to take off and become the de facto format to view and create PDF documents? Adobe made its PDF Reader available for free. This move, coupled with the Internet boom, caused the PDF format to be the standard for posting documents on the Net, for viewing or for downloading.

Relevant to the legal world, when federal courts adopted the PDF format as the format that litigants must use in electronic litigation, this assured that PDF would be the most common format used by lawyers, litigants and businesses.

The trouble with Adobe

Having used PDF software since 1996, both for law office document management and in federal court litigation, the main problems I find with Adobe Acrobat are two: 1) It is damn expensive; and 2) It is too complex for everyday law office use.

- **Cost.** A few years back, law offices were stuck with using Adobe Acrobat if anyone wanted to create PDF documents, as opposed to simply viewing them. This was a bad thing because Adobe Acrobat has always been a very expensive piece of software. A current review of



Adobe's offerings shows that Acrobat Standard prices start at \$299! Prices for Acrobat Pro start at a whopping \$449! Acrobat Pro is advertised as the program that has "expanded capabilities for converting, protecting and sharing documents and forms."

• **Complexity.** I have used the Adobe Acrobat Pro program beginning with Version 3 (Acrobat is now up to Version 9.) I stopped using Acrobat Pro after Version 7. I mention this as a foundation to comment: **Acrobat Pro is too complex for lawyers.**

As any true trial lawyer knows, litigation in state and federal court is chock full of complexities, stress and time-consuming tasks. I have found over the years that I have very little time to learn all the digital/electronic features, benefits and nuances of programs such as Word, WordPerfect, accounting software, timekeeping programs and document and litigation management software. For example, I would estimate that I know how to use perhaps 1/100th of one percent of the capability of Microsoft Word. It is not my fault. I simply do not have time to learn every program's features and capabilities. I am sure that I am not unique in this respect.

Take it from me: Adobe Acrobat Pro is a very complex program. It has many fantastic features and benefits, but I have never had the time to learn everything that the program can do. When I had a federal filing due in a few hours, I could not take the time to explore Acrobat to find out how to do something nor to learn all about Acrobat's intricacies.

What you need your PDF software to do

I have used PDF software in the days when most people did not know even what PDF meant. Nowadays there are so many PDF programs out there it is easy to get confused. You can Google "PDF creation software" or other similar search terms and see what I mean. With this in

mind, I suggest you look for and consider the following:

• **Trial version.** I would not buy a program that does not let me try it out first. There is no reason to be forced into buying a product only to later find out that the program does not suit your needs or is deficient. Ethical software developers will *always* offer free trial downloads for you to try out a program. It is nice to see that most software vendors do in fact now provide free downloads of their offerings. You should always try out new software *before* you buy. Do not simply read a company's well-designed Web page, pull out your credit card and buy the program.

• **File size.** Every PDF creation program will produce PDF files in varying sizes over the competing programs. The size of the files you create is very important because all federal courts restrict or limit the size of the documents filed with the court. For example, a court may state in its rules that each electronic filing cannot exceed five MB. What this means is that if that if you have a 125-page filing that is 10 MB, you must break up the filing into two individual five-MB documents *before* filing. What a hassle.

Some PDF creation programs produce files that are too large. Usually that means the software developer took the cheap route and did not create compression code sufficient to compact documents into small sizes sufficient for federal filings.

For example, I created a PDF file using two different PDF creation programs, *A-PDF* and the other *ActMask Document Converter Pro*. On a 180-page Word document *A-PDF* converted the document into a 600K file (the file resolution was 300 dpi, or dots per inch, which is presentable for a federal filing.) On the same settings, *ActMask Document Converter Pro* converted that same Word document into a 2.4 MB file!

• **Merging.** *This is a critical feature* that most lawyers don't think about until they are faced with wanting to insert an addi-

tional page into, for example, the 180-page PDF pleading mentioned above (perhaps a signed signature page to a declaration.) Using my Acrobat 7 Pro, I never had the time to find out if the program could do this, and I had to use a separate document management program to do a workaround.

Nowadays, there are programs that provide this feature, or as the *A-PDF* program does, they sell a separate program that provides this function. (Arguably, a program that performs only certain functions is far easier to learn and use than one program that has so many features that it takes too much time to learn how to do something, especially when under the press of a filing deadline.)

• **Editing.** Some programs allow you to remove stray dots, marks, text or other material from a page. Editing a PDF file is essential when, for example, a document needs redaction of confidential information before a public filing or needs to be cleaned up so the document is readable and looks presentable.

• **Converting.** Converting a document is an essential function of any PDF creation program. The more complex programs can turn *any* file into a PDF file.

The simple-to-use programs are literally "one-click" easy. For example, you can click "print" in whatever program you have open (Word, picture viewing programs, Internet browser) and select your PDF converting program as the "printer." It then converts the document into a PDF file and places it into any folder you select. You cannot get simpler than that!

• **Non-Complex.** In my opinion, programs for lawyers have to be as "one-click" as possible. With the press of business, true litigation lawyers do not have time to learn the complexities of law office software. PDF creation software must be as simple as possible. When you download trial software, be mindful of how easy the software is to use. If it takes you an hour to learn how to do a simple



NOVEMBER 2008

task, then move on to another trial download.

An example of a low-priced alternative to Acrobat Pro

After using their products for a few months, I recommend you take a look at “Affordable PDF Tools” or “A-PDF.” They are located at <http://www.a-pdf.com>.

As stated above, since the 1990s I have used Acrobat Pro and about five alternative programs. In 2008, I can confidently say that I am most impressed with A-PDF products. Specifically:

- A-PDF offers very-few-clicks programs; they are simple to install and use;
- They provide trial downloads;
- They offer the ability to buy only the programs with the functions that you need (i.e., Microsoft Word to PDF; image

to PDF, PDF merger; PDF File Splitter; Password Security, etc.); and

- Their pricing is great. For example, prices range from individual programs at \$35 to \$99 for packages or groups of programs. [Hint: I suspect if you ask the vendor, you could negotiate a group price for individual programs of your choosing.] These are far better prices than paying \$450 for the extremely complex Acrobat Pro.

Conclusion

Many lawyers buy the Acrobat Pro program based on price – the more expensive the program is, the better it must be. They don’t think about what features Acrobat provides nor do they even search for alternatives. In such situations, Acrobat may become “shelf ware” because the office will end up using Acrobat to per-

form simple “\$40 tasks” and nothing more.

This article has shown that there are low-cost alternatives to spending \$500 or more for a program that creates, edits and manages PDF documents in the electronic litigation setting.

There are only a few features that a lawyer needs when dealing with PDF documents. So, why buy Acrobat, with its significant learning curve, when for 10 percent of Acrobat’s cost you can start using “three-click” programs that will enable you to get your pleadings filed by 11:50 p.m.? (You fed trial lawyers know that unless otherwise ordered, the federal filing deadline is 12 midnight.) Most risk-taking, overworked lawyers wait until the last minute to file federal pleadings. (If you don’t push it to the limit, you’re a pantywaist.)