



STAR Fast Forward

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This guy sees it all

Camarillo firm searches for high-tech clues

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Cheating, stealing and lying: It's all stored on your computer.

John Troxel is the new private detective, searching the 1's and 0's for the transgressions of spouses and employees.

The certified computer forensics expert is able to make a perfect copy of a computer's memory without changing it, and then conduct the search using tools that hold up in court.

"I've been called in the middle of the night to go image a hard drive and bring it back here," he said, pointing over his shoulders to the beige filing cabinet locked up next to his desk.

Troxel works mostly with business attorneys. Many of his cases involve proprietary information, confidential data, trade secrets and misuse of corporate property.

For instance, a medical supply company got suspicious when a salesman started up his own firm and took several clients with him.

A search of the computer he used at work turned up an affair



Photos: Jason Redmond / Star Staff

with a customer and more.

"I found evidence that he had used company property to set up his company," Troxel said.

It's not a Raymond Chandler

novel, but he feels a thrill in running off to collect information before it can be changed.

"It is kind of fun being in a big office building by yourself," he said.

Broadening their horizons

His company, Verdict Resources, is a small Camarillo firm once only known for digging up the histories of contaminated land.

The office has three rooms, but just Troxel and his father, Larry, work there.

Above Troxel's desk, which is covered in disemboweled computers, hangs a map of Los Angeles from the turn of the last century.

It is a paradox of two sides of the business -- one digging through the past and the other on the cutting edge of investigative technology.

Larry said the investigative techniques apply whether they are working on a white-collar criminal investigation or checking to see if employees are downloading pornography at work.

Part of the private investigation business is being able to do lots of things, but have a speciality.

"Like more law firms, you have to broaden your horizons," Larry said.

Broadening seems to have been an effective move, taking the company to about \$500,000 per year in revenue.

A typical computer forensics investigations runs from \$1,000 to \$3,000. Other investigations can be a quick \$50 search or a \$50,000 long-term project.

Troxel takes personal cases, too. A wife who was suspicious of her husband's online activities asked him to check the family computer.

Troxel found more than 30,000 pornographic images, including many illegal pictures.

The family now is embroiled in a custody dispute, and the information is key evidence.

Computer forensics has been used by law enforcement for years, but now businesses are realizing

the potential, said G.J. Goldwyn of AComputerPro.com.

Goldwyn is a networking consultant who sometimes works with Verdict Resources.

"It is the emerging industry for the private sector," she said.

The need for computer forensics in civil matters is growing, Goldwyn said, but it will be difficult for the industry to keep up.

Not all private investigators or all computer technicians can set up shop in the business.

"It takes specific training and resources to be able to do it correctly," she said.

Plenty to find

There are two reasons that computer forensics can be so fruitful.

First, people write more than they used to when a typewriter and stamp were required.

Second, all of that information, no matter how inconsequential, is stored into the memory of the computer.

When an item is deleted all that happens is the space is allowed to be written over, but that might not happen for months, Troxel said.

Old e-mails, discarded memos, spreadsheets, passwords, encrypted files, instant messages and pictures are all fair game.

It might seem creepy that this seemingly private information can be retrieved, Troxel said, but these searches are performed for the rightful owner of the computer.

In the case of a business, the employee is often misusing company property and, in some cases, committing crimes against the company.



Combing high-tech tools and old-fashioned detective work, John Troxel searches computer hard drives for evidence that can stand up in court. Businesses are realizing the potential for computer forensics in protecting their interests against, for instance, employees who use company resources for personal gain.

"They are covering their assets," Troxel said.

His business has grown as word has spread about these kind of investigations.

He contracts with specialized help for big projects, and he admitted that a lot of times he just works late nights to get orders done.

His message to attorneys and business groups has been that the specialized techniques matter.

In court, any little slip can open the door for the information to be discredited.

A company might try to use an in-house technology team, but the standard methods can damage evidence, he said.

"Just turning on a computer like Windows 98 turns on 498 files," he said.

Maintaining the integrity of computer can be critical in a situation like one Troxel helped defend.

A client was under investigation by a federal agency for the actions of several employees.

The evidence of when and what was done on the computers assisted the defense attorney in the case, Troxel said.

On the Net:
<http://www.verdict.net>