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Review: Adobe Acrobat 9 Pro Extended

By Bryan Sims

Adobe Acrobat 9
www.adobe.com/products/acrobat

TechnoScore: 4.5
1 = Lowest Possible Score; 5 = Highest Possible Score

INTRODUCTION

I concentrate my practice in commercial litigation matters. As a result, most of my cases involve thousands of pages of documents. I wanted the ability to practice from anywhere, so several years ago I began scanning all of my documents to PDF and using Adobe Acrobat to view, manipulate, and comment on the documents.

Since starting this process (with Adobe Acrobat 6), I have reaped the benefits of the improvements that Adobe has made in each of the successive versions of the product. In particular, I was a big fan of the typewriter tool added in version 7 as well as the Bates Stamping and Redaction tools added in version 8.

Thus, I was eager to get my hands on the new version to see what improvements Adobe had made. After using the program for several weeks, I was pleased to discover several improvements to an already great product.

Adobe Acrobat 9 comes in three flavors: Standard, Pro, and Extended. In a consumer friendly move, Adobe has taken some features that were previously available only in the Pro version and moved them to the Standard version. The most important of these is the Forms feature.

Two key features that Pro has that Standard lacks are Bates Stamping and Redaction.

Extended adds a variety of 3D and video options that most practitioners probably won't find useful.

Therefore, the best fit for most attorneys is likely the Pro version.

The Standard version costs $299, Pro $449, and Extended $699. If you have a prior version of Adobe Acrobat 6 or later (either Pro or Standard), you'll pay $99 for Standard, $159 for Pro, and $229 for Extended.

> The improvements in the Forms function is reason enough to upgrade to version 9.

IMPROVED PREEXISTING FEATURES

The biggest improvement in the Bates Stamping feature lies in the Output Options button. Acrobat now enables you to save the stamped documents in a different folder, add a prefix or suffix to the file names, or replace the file names with the starting and ending Bates numbers. You can also choose whether to overwrite existing files or create a log file of your activities. All of these useful features make Bates Stamping with Acrobat better and easier to use.

The Redaction feature now contains pattern-based searching for items such as credit card numbers, phone numbers, social security numbers, and dates. This improvement means that you can find these items across multiple documents without having to manually search for each one.

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Adobe has also greatly improved the typewriter tool by giving you control over the font, font size, font color, and line spacing. If you have ever been frustrated by your inability to adjust your text with the prior versions of the typewriter tool, you will be thrilled with the changes Adobe has made.

The greatest improvement that I have seen, however, resides in the Forms feature. With Acrobat 8, I could create a form. However, doing so was not an easy process. Every time I tried to use the feature, I ended up spending a lot of time trying to get the form right. And I still usually ended up with a form that worked, but was not what I wanted.

With version 9, however, Adobe has made the Forms feature much more functional. The form wizard recognizes the form fields better. Also, I can now easily add new fields or modify any of the automatically recognized fields. Plus, Adobe has made form creation even easier by having all of the fields appear in the left sidebar. This means I can easily access and modify them, and I can change the tab order of the fields simply by dragging the field names around.

The document comparison function works very smoothly and enables you to quickly and easily determine the differences between two PDFs.

The difference between creating forms in 9 versus 8 is huge. With Acrobat 9, I can now create a form in just a few minutes. Given the number of poorly created court forms that I regularly deal with as well as the propensity for people to send me Word documents that they expect me to treat as forms, the improvements in the Forms function is reason enough to upgrade to version 9.

NEW FEATURES

In addition to improving already existing features, Adobe has added some new useful features. One of

these features enables you to easily split documents by a certain number of pages, by file size (very convenient to avoid electronic filing size limitations), or by top level bookmarks. Additionally, just as with Bates Stamping, you can choose to output the split files into a different folder or to add a label before or after the file name.

I am also impressed with the document comparison function found in this version. It works very smoothly and enables you to quickly and easily determine the differences between two PDFs. The changes show up as comments. Thus, they are in a format that I am already familiar with. I have used this feature a few times and really like the implementation.

In version 8, Adobe introduced PDF packages, which enabled you to combine different PDFs together in a single package, rather than a single document. I use this feature to bundle my deposition exhibits. In version 9, Adobe has expanded this capability and created PDF Portfolios. These serve a couple of functions.

First, they enable you to group together a variety of documents in different formats. This means you can create a portfolio that includes PDFs, Word documents, Excel documents, etc. This makes it easy to put together a variety of documents for your client to sign and review, all in a single package. Additionally, with the Pro and Pro Extended versions, you can add multimedia effects to your portfolio and incorporate flash video.

Portfolios enable you to create presentations that you can send to current or potential clients in a seamless package. These can enhance your image and perhaps persuade some potential clients to hire you.

Further, although you need Pro or Pro Extended to create these portfolios, they can be read by anyone who has Reader. Thus, you can send them to anyone and feel confident that they can access the documents.

STILL NOT PERFECT

Despite the number of improvements in this version, the program still falls short of perfect. The biggest quibble that I have with the program has plagued

me since I began using Acrobat: The toolbar is not sufficiently customizable.

I am very particular about my screen space. Because of this, I create custom toolbars in every program I use. In creating these custom toolbars, I make each icon justify its existence on the toolbar. The icon must be for a function that I use often and not something that I can more easily accomplish using keyboard shortcuts. Creating these toolbars enables me to work in the manner most efficient to me. Furthermore, by providing customizable toolbars the software manufacturer demonstrates that it recognizes some people find certain features more useful than others, and that each of us works in our own manner.

Although Acrobat 9 is light years ahead of versions 6 or 7 in terms of the ability to customize toolbars, it still has a long way to go. In this version, I can choose which icons to display from the prepro- grammed toolbars. However, I cannot choose which commands to add to those toolbars. For example, the File Toolbar enables me to choose between commands such as Open, Print, Save, etc. However, I can select only commands from the preprogrammed list. If I have a command that I use frequently that is not on that list (such as Save As), I have no way of adding it to a toolbar.

This is my one major complaint. Unfortunately, because of the nature of the issue, I must deal with it every time I use the program.

WISH LIST

The other complaint that I have about the program is that Adobe has not created "Create PDF" but- tons for Firefox. Adobe creates such buttons for the Microsoft Office programs as well as Internet Explorer. However, despite the fact that Firefox is open source, Adobe has not created these buttons for Firefox. Given that I use Firefox as my primary browser (and I know I am not alone), I would really like to see this feature added.

CONCLUSION

Adobe Acrobat 9 is not a perfect program. How- ever, I use it daily in my law practice and I would not want to practice law without it. The improve- ments made in version 9, especially those made to the Typewriter and Forms features, are significant enough to justify upgrading from version 8. If you are still using version 6 or 7, I definitely suggest upgrading to 9.

If the toolbar were more customizable, I would not hesitate to give Acrobat 9 a perfect score. As it stands, however, I give Adobe Acrobat 9 a TechnoScore of 4.5 out of 5.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bryan Sims is a Partner at Thompson, Rosenthal & Watts, LLP., where he concentrates his practice in the areas of commercial litigation and civil appeals. Before entering private practice, Bryan worked as a law clerk for Illinois Supreme Court Justice S. Louis Rathje. Bryan is a Cum Laude graduate of Wheel- ing Jesuit University and a Magna Cum Laude graduate of Loyola University Chicago School of Law. Bryan has spoken on legal technology issues for both the Illinois State Bar Association and the Chicago Bar Association. He was named the 2005 TechnoLawyer of the year. Bryan blogs at The Con- nected Lawyer www.theconnectedlawyer.com.

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