

Solo But Not Alone: Building Connections in Our Common Legal Ecosystem

Many of us are solo or small firm practitioners, but none of us should feel cut off from the legal community and our connections to other lawyers, because we are all in this together.

BY RYAN M. BILLINGS

According to the State Bar of Wisconsin's latest figures, 92% of Wisconsin law firms have five or fewer lawyers. Nearly three-quarters of Wisconsin law firms have only one lawyer. These numbers can leave the impression that, for the most part, Wisconsin lawyers are on their own.

This impression is wrong. First, we are all bound together in a State Bar that exists for our common benefit. Among many other things, one of the advantages membership offers is access to the State Bar's Practice Management Program (Practice411™). This program helps lawyers manage the non-legal side of practice, such as business development, marketing, intake, succession planning, personnel and operations management, practice management systems, technology, and data security. We all have been educated and trained in how to practice law, but gaining competence in running a law firm is not part of any mandatory requirement to obtain or maintain our licenses. The Practice411 program is just one example of how our common participation in an organization of thousands of lawyers provides resources we can lean on to assist us in our individual legal practices.

Second, we are all bound together in a legal ecosystem from which we all benefit, and without which none of us could maintain our legal practices. Recognizing and tapping into this ecosystem can reap significant professional and personal benefits. For instance, one way to build relationships and trust with clients is to tell them that they can come to us for help with any legal problem they have. If their problem

is something we do, we will help them directly, and if it is not something we do, we will help guide them to a skilled lawyer in the practice area they need.

To provide that service, we need to know what other Wisconsin lawyers do and develop relationships with those lawyers to ensure that any clients we refer are put in good hands. Building those networks provides mutual benefits, as lawyers with whom we have relationships of mutual trust and respect should be just as likely to recommend us when their clients have a problem outside of their own areas of expertise. And, in developing these mutual relationships, we should be comfortable asking other lawyers questions about their practices and the way they assess legal problems (even those "stupid questions" from which we learn the most), and generous when other lawyers ask us those same questions about our fields. Along those lines, grabbing a beverage or a meal with another lawyer is an excellent way to develop bonds, learn from the experiences of others, and participate in the legal community beyond our office. There are also few better ways of bonding than commiserating over the common frustrations that we all experience in practicing law.

So yes, many of us are alone in the sense of being solo or small practitioners, but none of us should feel cut off from the legal community and our connections (personal and practical) to other lawyers, as we are – in a very real and meaningful sense – all in this together. **WL**



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