

Practice Roundtable Gets it Right



By Thomas L. Cuni

The recent disruption in the nation's economy has made a rude intrusion into our profession. For the first time in my memory, there have been staff and attorney layoffs at law firms. Many recent law school graduates are experiencing difficulty in finding employment. For some, this may mean starting or continuing a legal career as a solo practitioner, with an association of attorneys, or in a small firm.

There's a program at the CBA to assist attorneys who are in transition in their careers: the Practice Roundtable. It is a modest program, but one which has been very popular with those who have participated. The Practice Roundtable provides an opportunity for attorneys to ask a panel of experienced practitioners questions on a broad range of topics.

I have participated in several roundtable sessions and the subjects of each

to share their varied experiences in the many aspects of opening and operating a law office.

That alone is worth the (free) price of admission for the Practice Roundtable: there is a true diversity of background, opinion and experience offered by the "experts" gathered around the table. In such an open format, you can have the best of the best, and create a solution that fits the challenge you face.

In another recent session, a new attorney had questions about how he should move into an area of practice in which he had little experience. The attorneys on the panel were able to offer insights or appropriate learning, practice opportunities and marketing his new field of practice. In such a free-wheeling forum, going from education to business development is not only useful, it is energizing to everyone in the room.

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session varied widely. On one occasion the discussion centered on developing a business plan for an attorney with more than 10 years of practice in a larger law firm who was now embarking on a solo practice. He had never had to consider how the computers and software were selected and purchased, how the staff was hired, or what to do about accounting, taxes and banking. The three attorneys on the panel for that session were able

The CBA has consistently received positive comments from roundtable participants. Edwin (Terry) Patterson, the CBA's general counsel, originally conceived of the program as a positive way to assist attorneys in avoiding some of the common mistakes which can lead to disciplinary review. Often the mismanagement of a trust account or the failure to have an engagement letter leaves an attorney exposed to complaints by clients

and disciplinary action. Because law office management is not a subject taught in law schools, it was important to create a venue for discussing these ideas. Patterson's idea was to provide a venue where attorneys can learn from one another in a friendly atmosphere.

Along with Dimity Orlet, assistant counsel and director of CLE for the CBA, Patterson has compiled a list of more than 40 experienced attorneys with varied backgrounds who counsel and advise CBA members on a wide range of topics at roundtable sessions. Office technology, hiring staff, accounting, trust accounts, docketing and time-keeping systems, marketing, and managing client relationships have been discussed at the sessions in which I have participated over the past years.

And while there is the opportunity for real learning at the roundtables, there is something else, too: networking. When a group of attorneys is gathered in one place, the networking opportunities are endless. Those connections, more than ever, are key to business development.

This program has real merit and it is one that I would hope will be used by our membership to ease the transitions in their careers. If the Practice Roundtable sounds as though it would help you, or someone whom you know, the CBA is ready to help. ■

Thomas L. Cuni is 2009-10 president of the Cincinnati Bar Association.

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