

Networking: Why Every Lawyer Needs a Village

Lawyers who maintain a strong professional network – who regularly exchange knowledge, ideas, and war stories – tend to spot issues earlier, solve problems faster, and avoid pitfalls more deftly. Here’s why and how you can network with purpose – even for the introverts among us.

BY MATTHEW M. BEIER

Even the sharpest lawyers need a lifeline now and then. No matter how smart, diligent, or caffeine-fueled you are, you’re not immune from occasional blind spots, missteps, or legal conundrums that push you outside your usual practice comfort zone. And when that happens, your greatest resource might not be Lexis-Nexis, Westlaw, AI, or that dusty hornbook – it’s your network.

Networking and Competence: An Unexpected Pairing

At first glance, the concept of “networking” might seem unrelated to *competence* under the Wisconsin Supreme Court Rules. After all, SCR 20:1.1 simply tells us:

“A lawyer shall provide competent representation to a client. Competent representation requires the legal knowledge, skill, thoroughness and preparation reasonably necessary for the representation.”

It doesn’t exactly scream “You better get to that happy hour at the local bar association.” But here’s where we connect the dots.

Lawyers who maintain a strong professional network – who regularly exchange knowledge, ideas, and war stories – tend to spot issues earlier, solve problems faster, and avoid pitfalls more deftly. You don’t need to know everything. But you *do* need to know someone who knows what you don’t. And if you’re not building those relationships, you may be falling short of the reasonable preparation and knowledge required under Rule 1.1.

Networking as Risk Management

Legal malpractice isn’t always the result of gross negligence or a blown statute of limitation. Often, it stems from seemingly smaller mistakes: venturing into a new practice area without a

proper foundation, misinterpreting a nuanced procedural rule, or failing to spot a conflict.

Dabbling can be dangerous: WILMIC data shows that nearly 44% of all malpractice claims arise from cases in practice areas in which lawyers spend less than 10% of their time, while fewer than 3% of claims come from areas to which attorneys devote more than 80% of their practice – clear proof that straying outside your wheelhouse significantly increases your risk.

However, ABA Comment [2] recognizes that a lawyer doesn’t need prior experience in a specific area to be competent, provided that the lawyer pursues the necessary study or associates with a more experienced attorney. This highlights how collaboration can overcome knowledge gaps and ensure competent representation. In other



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words, networking isn't just smart – it's an ethical strategy.

Networking with colleagues – particularly at events like the State Bar of Wisconsin's Solo & Small Firm Conference in October in Wisconsin Dells – serves as a kind of early warning system. Someone you chat with at a continuing legal education (CLE) session might mention a common pitfall in estate planning. A colleague in your lunch group might warn you that a judge's local preferences aren't in the written rules. A casual call to a mentor could help you decide that maybe you shouldn't try to handle that patent matter for your cousin's startup.

The effect of these interactions is real – and it often amounts to risk avoidance that no legal malpractice policy could match.

To the Introverts in the Room: We See You

Let's acknowledge the elephant in the

conference center: not every lawyer is a glad-handing, extroverted schmoozer who thrives on small talk over lukewarm chicken with rice and white gravy. Many attorneys identify as introverts. If that's you, the idea of mingling at organization events or chatting up strangers at a CLE may sound like the equivalent of Count Rugen's Pit of Despair.

But hear this: you don't have to be the life of the party. You just have to show up and engage in your own way. Find small group opportunities like Brent Hoeft's Practice411™ Practice Management Roundtable or State Bar section meetings. Volunteer for a section committee where the interaction is focused on a specific task rather than social interaction. Set a goal to connect with just one new person at each event – someone who practices in a different practice area that interests you or who is further along in their career.

Dave Matthews is one of my favorite musical artists, and the line from one of

his songs, "However small/First step is hardest of all," makes sense under these circumstances. Putting yourself out there, even just a little, can open doors to valuable resources when a nuanced issue comes across your desk. Whether it's learning how to interpret the finer points of special needs trusts or figuring out how to navigate a particular judge's courtroom, someone out there knows and, more likely than not, is willing to help.

Mentoring: Networking with Purpose

Mentorship might be the most impactful form of networking. It offers structure, continuity, and a trusted source of insight, which is much more effective than a hallway chat. Programs such as the Dane County Bar Association's mentorship initiative, led by Pines Bach attorney Josh Kindkeppel, offer newer lawyers access to the wisdom of experienced practitioners who've been there, done that, and likely have a brief or two to prove it. As Kindkeppel describes it:

"The DCBA's mentorship program was created in large part to provide newer attorneys an opportunity to connect with seasoned attorneys on a monthly basis to discuss tricky legal and ethical issues, professional development, and civility. We wanted newer attorneys to feel supported, that is, that they weren't alone as they embarked on what is often a stressful profession. Since we launched the program in 2007, hundreds of mentor-mentee pairs have participated in the program, attended the program's top-notch CLE presentations, and have found it to be rewarding on a personal and professional level. At the end of the day, the more people we know the smaller the community feels."

These relationships are a two-way street: mentors gain fresh perspectives, while mentees get practical advice, encouragement, and the reassurance that they're not alone. It's hard to overstate the impact of being able to call a mentor and say, "Have you ever dealt with this situation before?" and not only receive

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insight – but also avoid a potential costly mistake.

Think Outside Your Contact List

While other lawyers are a natural go-to for networking, don't overlook unexpected but valuable connections. For example, consider getting to know the claims department of your legal malpractice carrier. Most attorneys view their insurer as someone they hope never to call. But your claims attorney can be one of your best allies in navigating professional responsibility or claim issues before they turn into full-blown claims.

With sufficient warning, a claims attorney can often "right the ship" or correct the situation before significant damages are incurred or a lawsuit ensues. This is what the insurance industry commonly identifies as "claim repair." In other words, claims attorneys can often find a way to fix or mitigate the matter.

Call your carrier's risk management

team. Many offer CLEs, articles, and even sample forms and checklists. A five-minute chat with a claims attorney could save you from a five-figure headache. (And yes, Wisconsin Lawyers Mutual Insurance Co. offers all the above. Just saying.)

Digital Networking: Not Just for Influencers

If you can't always make it to in-person events, platforms like LinkedIn and legal-specific forums can be surprisingly powerful. A well-placed comment on someone's post, or a thoughtful response to a legal question, can build goodwill and spark new relationships. Just keep it professional – save the memes and diatribes for your group texts.

Email listservs for bar associations, such as the State Bar's Solo/Small Firm and General Practice listservs, can also be networking goldmines. It's like having a roomful of colleagues in your

inbox, all willing to weigh in when you're scratching your head over a procedural nuance or looking for a referral in an unfamiliar county.

Networking Isn't Optional – It's Strategic

If you take away nothing else from this article about the value of professional connection, remember this: networking isn't just about referrals or reputation polishing. It's about competence. It's about risk avoidance. It's about having someone to call before you dive into uncharted waters – and making sure someone has your back when things get murky.

So, whether you're an extroverted firm partner, a freshly minted solo, or a quiet researcher who prefers precedent to people, find your own way to connect. Join that bar section. Attend that CLE. Send that email to a mentor. Call your carrier.

Because you may practice solo – but you never have to go it alone. **WL**

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