

Social technology:

Are connectivity and connection synonymous?



This issue of the magazine is a wonderful addition to the growing wealth of knowledge in the profession related to social media and how lawyers can use it to build business, reach out and connect to the world. Connection is vitally important to making your client base grow and to helping you earn a living.

At the same time, at the Ontario Lawyers Assistance Program, we see that the personal, face-to-face connection to others that has defined human interaction is on the wane, which is a worrisome development.

As lawyers, we connect and communicate using office telephones, cellphones, fax machines, emails, text messaging and blogs. Blackberries, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, APPS, WAPS, syndication, .mobi and many more tools keep us in touch.

A comedian/philosopher once noted that life would be different if inventions had come in a different order. What if we

already had the Internet and then phones were invented? People would marvel at the concept that you could actually talk to another person directly and hear their voice!

So, with all of this new and exciting technology infiltrating professional law practice and entrenching itself in it, what consequences do we see showing up at OLAP?

First, the work day has expanded to no less than 24 hours a day, seven days a week. There seems to be less and less time for family, friends and holidays.

Second, people no longer work exclusively within the confines of an office building. Increasing numbers of people work from home or on the road and, as a direct result, become isolated from their colleagues.

Finally, even when people do take holidays, many choose to remain tethered to their workplace through the technology

that they now see as essential. As people rely less and less on meaningful interpersonal skills to create and foster authentic real-world relationships, anxiety is heightened. One cannot help but notice that the digital realm is inherently impersonal. A relationship built the cyber way often makes one feel like something is missing. And yet, the pressure to keep up and master the medium is intense.

The result is an increase in problems related to stress, burnout, addictions and mental wellness concerns. Statistics compiled by the Legal Profession Assistance Conference, the umbrella organization for all lawyer assistance programs across Canada, demonstrate that lawyers are three times more likely than the general population to have issues with alcohol, drugs and mental illness. If life in the law before the digital age wasn't stressful enough, an entire additional set of new stressors has been added to the equation.

Making the people connection happen

In the current climate, OLAP receives calls from about 1,400 people in the profession each year who demonstrate an ever-more-acute need to connect and reconnect with a live human being. To that end, our peer support volunteers offer a friendly and non-judgmental ear to lawyers, law students, judges and their immediate families, some or all of whom may be in distress.

As well, the professional staff in our offices who receive a person's first call are all lawyers specifically trained to offer a knowing and supportive ear as well as guidance towards the help that is required in each circumstance.

As people, we need to talk and say things out loud, get assurances that we are okay as persons, that our actions do not define us as people and that there is someone to call when we need to unburden ourselves. It will come as no surprise that lawyers hold entirely too much inside of themselves. They feel shame for finding themselves in their current predicament, while assuming erroneously that everyone else in the profession is completely pulled together and fine. The irony is that if this were true, OLAP would have no purpose. The numbers just quoted prove that clearly it does.

By way of example, a person addicted to alcohol invariably isolates him or herself from other people. As use becomes misuse and then abuse and then

dependence, an alcoholic alienates people from his or her life. Families are fractured, friends are pushed away, partnerships are dissolved and the loneliness and solitude is filled in with more alcohol.

The same tortuous cycle holds true with drug addiction. The fastest growing addiction – compulsive use of the Internet – is the epitome of social isolation, evidenced by hours spent alone in front of a computer screen with no in-person, live human contact. When someone struggles with a mental wellness issue, the isolation is deafening. The personal and societal stigma leads directly to denial and further withdrawal. The situation continues to devolve and this just makes things progressively worse.

OLAP resources

So, what do you do when the burgeoning world of technological marvels that is ostensibly designed to make your life easier and more productive, has the opposite effect? What do you do when all of this pervasive connectivity leaves you lonely, isolated and in distress? Call OLAP. Talk to one of our professional staff: Doron Gold, Terri Wilkinson or Jill Fenaughty. Talk to Leota Embleton, our program manager, who is a social worker, an addiction, gambling and marriage counsellor with international certification. And, of course, our Volunteer Executive Director John Starzynski is always willing to share his personal experience

of living with bi-polar disorder, to try to help take the fear out of talking about and getting help for mental illness. Our ever-expanding roster of peer volunteers located across the province give of their time to talk to those in distress and pain.

OLAP is a 24-hour, confidential peer support and counselling program that can help get you started on the road to recovery with just a phone call. To learn about OLAP, its services and the issues covered by its various services, go to www.olap.ca.

OLAP also sponsors a number of a number of groups for lawyers designed to break the isolation and foster connection. The newest group which we have established to help fight against lawyer isolation is our Lawyers' Group. On the first and third Wednesday of each month at 5:30 p.m., a diverse and ever-changing collection of lawyers meets at the OBA offices in Toronto to provide support to colleagues and to safely and confidentially discuss their issues without judgment or the fear of someone trying to "fix" them.

As well, the Women's Wellness and Balance Group, along with the Women's Law Association of Ontario, has lunch quarterly to address issues relevant to women in the profession.

You will also find OLAP in your local community. Across Ontario, OLAP representatives enthusiastically attend legal groups such as county and district law association meetings to speak and network, spreading the word about the necessity of lawyer wellness. The more members of the bar that know about us and our message of health and wellness, the more confident we are that members of our community can not only be professionally connected and successful, but personally healthy and fulfilled. Real world, face-to-face connection is not passé. It has never been more necessary than it is now.

To contact the OLAP team, please call **1-877-576-6227**

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