

Independent but engaged: Support networks for solos

There are plenty of good reasons for choosing sole practice, or for transitioning into sole practice after practising with a firm. You may have chosen to practise in a small community; you may have opened a sole practice because you couldn't find the right fit with a firm in your chosen area of practice; or you may be a person with a naturally independent work style and a desire to be your own boss. Whatever a lawyer's reasons, sole practice is a choice that can be profitable and personally rewarding.

Practising solo, however, presents special challenges. From a risk management perspective, it can be more challenging, because lawyers who practise alone lack colleagues close at hand with whom to discuss tricky legal issues. From a business perspective, it means that you alone are responsible for bringing in business; and business development activities take up precious time that you would otherwise spend doing the work that earns you money. Finally, from the perspective of life satisfaction and mental health, sole practice can be isolating.

With a small investment of time and energy, lawyers who practise alone can mitigate all of these risks by building a support network.

Make connecting with peers a priority

When you are trying to build a new business, it can be tempting to spend your days holed up in your office, working hard at "marketing" during the gaps between client matters. But making the effort to introduce yourself within the broader legal community will make marketing easier in the long run, and will ensure that you don't fall prey to the pitfalls of isolation.

Conversely, if your practice is well-established, you may feel that you are "too busy" to interact with your peers. This can be a mistake, because if you let your relationships with other lawyers fade away, it can be harder to find help when you need it – for example, if a health or family crisis forces you to take unexpected time off.

Meet your "senior partners"

Perhaps the most important category of connections new sole practitioners can make are with lawyers who have many years of experience. These lawyers are likely to be especially valuable to you as mentors.

Because successful and established lawyers are busy, it may take some effort to cultivate relationships with them; but lawyers who take the time to seek out mentors are often pleasantly surprised at their senior colleagues' willingness to help. One way to build relationships with potential mentors is to make referrals, either of an entire client matter, or, where possible, an issue related to a client's matter that is outside your current comfort zone, but is something you'd like to learn to do. For example, if you draft wills but have never dealt with the intergenerational transfer of a farming business, you might

refer the file to a more experienced lawyer, but ask for the opportunity to review the finished will (with the client's consent, of course) and to speak with the other lawyer about the issues.

You may also be able to gain a mentor by making yourself available as a backup to another sole practitioner – for example, by agreeing to file documents and receive courier packages when the lawyer is away, or to appear on his or her behalf to seek an adjournment should a last-minute conflict come up.

The benefits of mentoring flow in the other direction too: if you have been in practice a long time, taking the time to forge connections with new lawyers who come into your community can provide opportunities for you to learn about new technologies and new theories of practice.

To learn more about how to establish a productive mentoring relationship, you can download the practicePRO program's "[Managing a Mentoring Relationship](#)" booklet on the practicepro.ca website.

Meet your new “associates”

If you are not already a member of the Canadian and Ontario Bar associations, signing up is one of the easiest ways to build connections with lawyers in your community, and joining a practice section is a great way to meet lawyers in your particular area of practice. While these associations are perhaps best known for their continuing professional development programs, they also host general social and networking events, and not only in Toronto – there are a number of programs each year offered in other communities around Ontario. There are also local associations serving every part of the province.

Besides the national, provincial, and district law associations, there are also associations that have been developed by lawyers who share practice interests, culture, or other demographics. These associations typically encourage mentorship, networking, and mutual support. A few examples:

- the Women's Law Association of Ontario
- the Criminal Trial Lawyers' Association
- the Hispanic Canadian Lawyers' Association
- the Family Lawyers' Association
- the Canadian Association of Black Lawyers
- l'Association des juristes d'expression française de l'Ontario

And there are many more.

Of course, just joining an association is not enough. To get the full benefit of this kind of community-building, consider volunteering in an administrative role, or offering to give a presentation at an association meeting. The idea is to take advantage of as many

opportunities as possible to meet and converse with lawyers in your community and to build professional relationships and friendships. Don't only focus on introductions that will "be good for business." Getting to know people who may not be an immediate source of client referrals can offer other kinds of help. For example, the connections you make may be great sources of advice about local judges' preferences with respect to court materials, contact information for experts, or even just basic career advice. Finally, consider joining a club or other special interest group in your community.

Impress your opponents

If you are new to a local legal community, you can make excellent connections simply by treating opposing counsel with courtesy and respect. Often, the lawyers best placed to assess your professionalism and competence are the ones sitting on the other side of the negotiating table. If you can establish that you are both a competent advocate for your client and a reasonable and courteous opponent, you will be on your way to being accepted, within your practice area, as a person who does quality legal work and is worthy of respect. You may even get referrals from lawyers who have come to trust you, and who need to turn away clients for conflicts or other reasons.

Being seen as a reasonable opponent often boils down to basic professional courtesy: being accessible (returning phone calls and emails); keeping your word; and being fair when it comes to agreeing to adjournments, requests to reschedule meetings, and requests to allow the other side to rectify minor errors. It also means avoiding sharp practice and dirty tricks.

Be seen

Finally, you can't expect a network of allies to come to you. If you want to develop a support network, you need to get out of your office and meet other lawyers in person. This may mean traveling to attend the occasional conference or CPD program in person (instead of just watching webcasts at your desk), serving on an association executive, volunteering at charity events (especially those sponsored by the legal community), or attending social events.

You can also be "seen" on social media – for example, on LinkedIn, on Twitter, or as a participant in a legal online community (listserv, chat room, message board). If you like to write, consider launching a blog, and invite lawyer colleagues to subscribe to your posts, or to prepare "guest posts". You can also visit other lawyers' blogs, and engage them via commentary.

Sole practice is not for everyone; but if it's the right fit for you and you invest time in building your network, you can make your mark while avoiding isolation and practice risks.

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