

Committee's Goal is Helping Solos Succeed

By Sheryl L. Axelrod,
Harper J. Dimmerman and
James E. Elam

THIS SPRING, CHANCELLOR SCOTT F. Cooper reconstituted the Bar Association's Law Practice Management Division into the Law Practice Management Committee (LPMC) to confront a dual challenge in the profession brought about by the current state of the economy. First, more lawyers are considering opening up law firms and want guidance. Second, many small and solo practitioners want to learn how to streamline their operations and cut costs. Beyond getting by, lawyers want to know how to succeed, and in that desire was born the mission of the LPMC.

Cooper gave the following directive: provide programming aimed at helping lawyers start and effectively manage small and solo practices. Explain how you get a firm off the ground, and how you make a practice successful. "In essence, teach folks what you know about firm management," Cooper said after naming us co-chairs of the committee.

We approached the LPMC with the same vigor we bring to our practices. Each of us manages a law firm and seized upon the economic climate to grow our business. We did so by viewing the current economic downturn not as an obstacle, but as an opportunity. It presented new challenges and if we could meet them, we could leapfrog ahead. We decided to approach reinvigorating the LPMC with the same optimism. This



May Mon Post (from left) and Law Practice Management Committee Co-Chairs Sheryl L. Axelrod and Harper J. Dimmerman discussed running a solo or small practice at the Committee's Aug. 19 meeting.

Photo by Jeff Lyons

was not a challenge, we decided. It was an opportunity to reach out and make a difference for members of our profession.

We resolved to produce 12 programs a year and hit the ground running, brainstorming about the topics and speakers that could most benefit our colleagues.

We chose to design programs to answer the same questions we had before we learned how to run our law firms:

- How do I go about forming a practice?
- What can I do to brand and distinguish my firm from the competition?
- How do I generate business?
- What leadership skills would help me move my firm forward?
- Are there web-based legal research

tools that won't cost me a fortune?

- Where should I bank?
- How do I get a website off the ground?
- What should I do to manage my bookkeeping, and track my costs?
- How do I find an office location and lease that suit my needs?
- Should I utilize social media and if so, how?
- Is there a way to use technology to streamline my operations?
- What kinds of software could help my practice run smoothly? and
- How do I manage employees without a human resources director?

Once we knew the questions we wanted to address, we set up one program per month through to the end of the year, and locked in place top-notch speakers to provide our colleagues with the answers.

Our first meeting took place June 17 and was packed. We started at the beginning, addressing the first question many lawyers considering starting a practice have: how do I ethically determine which clients will be going with me to the new practice I am forming, and which will stay behind with the firm I'm departing? We brought in Ellen Freedman, CLM, of Freedman Consulting, Inc., who discussed "Changing Firms: Ethical Guidance for Law Firms and Attorneys." Freedman currently serves as the law practice management coordinator for the Pennsylvania Bar Association, and



Podcast Spotlight

Visit philadelphiabar.org to listen to the podcast from the Aug. 19 meeting of the Law Practice Management Committee.

has done so since 1999. The topic was clearly of great interest and she was peppered with questions. She not only went through the ethical rules on the subject, but answered each question thoroughly, giving concrete, practical advice. She gave attendees written materials, providing them with clear guidance they could use to draft letters to clients.

Susan Letterman White, JD, MS addressed the leadership skills needed to run your practice and advance its business at the July meeting. She engaged attendees in interactive group strategy discussions. Everyone was heard and each contributed to the learning process. We saw first hand through group exercises the importance of three things – teamwork, enlisting a diversity of opinion and leadership – and how each of the three work together. We even networked without realizing it, by working with the members of our teams. At the end, she gave us well-designed written materials to take back and implement in our practices.

On Aug. 19, we discussed "Running a Solo or Small Practice." May Mon Post runs a law firm and joined the committee co-chairs in a roundtable discussion about the lessons we've learned from running a law firm. We offered guidance on everything from cost-cutting to bill tracking to marketing. In short, we explained how to jump through the hoops we went through when we started our practices, and begin years ahead of the curve. We made our discussion open and interactive, and invited attendees to ask questions.

Dan Giancaterino, the education services manager at Jenkins Law Library, will discuss "Cost Effectively Conducting Legal Research" at our Sept. 16 meeting. In this age of information accessible through free or nearly free vehicles, many of them right on the web, we look forward to hearing his tips to keep our research costs down.

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LPM

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On its heels on Oct. 21, we get to hear from our co-chair James Elam and Jack Schaller, CIC of Eastern Legal Systems, who will discuss "Strategically Using Technology In Your Law Firm Practice." The discussion will touch on video conferencing, cloud computing, backing up data, virtual access to files, presentation applications, and more ways to use technology to benefit a practice, cut costs, better serve clients and move a law firm into the 21st century. Attendees will also be given seven helpful, simple "Technology Do's and Don'ts," along with advice about automating law practice management systems.

On Nov. 18, Kimberly Alford Rice of KLA Marketing Associates and Manny Trujillo of Swain Techs will speak about "Tips to Leverage Online Technology in Your Marketing Toolkit" with a focus on marketing and website management. They will talk about social networking, how to develop a strategic online marketing plan, how to integrate a website with key social media tools, and how to measure and track online activities to boost the firm's client base.

We will close out the year on Thursday, Dec. 16 providing guidance on a critical remaining consideration: how to hire and manage employees in compliance with

employment laws. Those of us who own small firms know we are the human resource director, whether we've been trained for the job or not. Natalie Klyashorny of Nochumson, PC, will speak on "Law Firm Workforce Issues for the 21st Century." The program will provide a primer on human resources issues and the challenges confronted by small and medium-sized law firms without formal human resources departments. The discussion will emphasize the necessity of maintaining and encouraging a work environment free from hostility and discrimination. It will be open and interactive. Those attending will have the opportunity to discuss their human resources issues and concerns.

Beyond our meetings, consider each of us as a resource you can go to when you have questions about law practice management. Each of us has gone through setting up a firm and is happy to help you. If you have ideas for additional programs you would like to see, let us know. Our calendar for this year is complete, but next year is just around the corner.

Sheryl L. Axelrod (saxelrod@theaxelrodfirm.com), is principal in The Axelrod Firm, PC. Harper J. Dimmerman (harper@hjdllaw.net) principal in The Law Office of Harper J. Dimmerman, P.C. James E. Elam (james@elamscottlaw.com) is a partner with Elam & Scott, L.L.P. They are co-chairs of the Law Practice Management Committee.

Zone Courts

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McCann and Selber explained that the District Attorney's Office will reorganize its office in line with the new zone court system so that assistant district attorneys are dedicated to geographic regions. Cunningham said the Defender's Association does not have any plans to reorganize in light of the new Zone Court System.

All speakers agreed that the biggest pitfall to this new system is the CJC building itself. Simply put, there are too many people trying to get into the building at the same time. All involved are working hard to pinpoint solutions that will alleviate that problem.

Perhaps the biggest change to the criminal justice system lies with the preliminary hearings that will now be held at the CJC rather than the respective districts. The prevailing thought is that centralizing preliminary hearings will minimize continuance requests and increase overall efficiency. There are, however, other potential problems. It is likely that it will become more difficult to get complaining witnesses to attend proceedings to testify if they have to

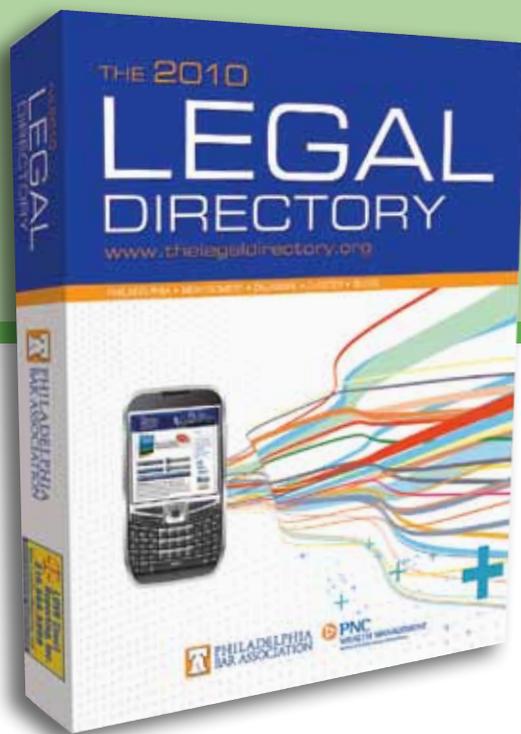
travel to Center City. Additionally, transporting detained defendants from the prisons to the CJC will likely become a major issue. Currently, police are responsible for transporting defendants to preliminary hearings in the district and the sheriff is responsible for transporting defendants to the CJC. There will be major scheduling conflicts if the Sheriff's Department now becomes responsible for transporting all defendants to the CJC for all preliminary hearings.

Another big change we can expect to see with this new system is the implementation of Strategic Management ARC Readiness Trial (SMART) courtrooms. Judges in the SMART courtrooms will perform the functions of the Felony Waiver Track Program (currently in room 705) and the Major Pretrial Unit (currently in room 1103). SMART judges will take over the responsibilities of those track rooms as well as the calendar judges so that an individual judge can handle a case from start to finish to increase efficiency and reduce overall volume.

Angie Halim (ahalim@aandzlaw.com) is an associate with Ahmad & Zaffarese, LLC.

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