

Making Contact: The Benefits of Building a Strong Network

TOO OFTEN, NETWORKING IS low on the list of priorities for a young, employed lawyer. Between figuring out the basics of law practice and meeting billable hours, networking can seem a chore necessary only for job seekers. However, the positive relationships that develop from networking can turn into mentorships, business referrals, and friendships. These relationships take time to build, which means the earlier an attorney starts, the more meaningful relationships he or she can form.

Local bar associations are important resources for networking with other attorneys in the area. The Los Angeles County Bar Association (LACBA) Barrister's Section offers many opportunities for young attorneys to connect with each other, as well as more experienced attorneys and the judiciary, e.g., it holds events such as the annual Bench and Bar Reception, which gives young attorneys a chance to connect with state and federal judges in the area. LACBA also has various other sections attorneys can join, based on their practice areas.

Volunteering with one of LABCA's legal services projects (Domestic Violence, Veterans, Immigration, and AIDS) is a great way to gain practical experience and to network with leading attorneys throughout Los Angeles who also volunteer with the projects. To encourage young attorneys to take advantage of these opportunities, LACBA recently changed its dues structure for new admittees and barristers. New admittees now receive LACBA and Barristers section memberships free for their first two years instead of one, and receive their third year for \$50, a free Barristers section, and one free onsite CLE program of up to two hours.

An affinity bar association is a professional organization of lawyers of diverse backgrounds, which may include race or ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, religious affiliation, veteran status, and more. Affinity bar associations provide smaller pools of attorneys to connect with, which results in more intimate settings and thus the ability to become acquainted faster. They can also provide unique volunteer opportunities as well as formal and informal mentorships.

For example, the Korean American Bar Association (KABA) holds regular events throughout the year, most of which are free to members. Members are often invited to participate in KABA-sponsored events, such as its monthly legal clinic, which provides free legal counsel to Korean Americans in Los Angeles. Members also attend conferences together—e.g., the National Asian Pacific American Bar Association Conference and the International Association of Korean Lawyers—which helps solidify connections within the group.

Both law firms and various bar associations provide financial help to allow attorneys to attend conferences across the nation and the world, which allows for meeting people from other places as well as reinforcing relationships with those who traveled from the same place. Conferences for those in the legal field exist not only for various affinities but also different practice

areas. Many of them offer CLE credit for California attorneys, which provides an extra incentive for them to attend.

Alumni associations also offer networking opportunities since connecting with individuals outside the legal field is just as important as networking within it. Connecting with undergraduate and law school local alumni groups and getting involved in leadership and volunteer positions within those groups can provide pressure-free environments in which a young lawyer can establish friendships, mentorships, and potential business connections. Various universities also partner with other schools in hosting events, which can further expand networking opportunities.

Outside the established frameworks of bar and alumni associations are various organizations that provide networking opportunities through volunteering. While lawyers are encouraged to engage in pro bono matters, volunteering outside the legal field offers fresh perspectives, with the added benefits of giving back to the community and meeting new people.

Junior League of Los Angeles provides a highly structured environment in which women connect with one another and volunteer for various causes. Locating specific charities and other nonprofits with volunteer programs is an option as well for those who are concerned about the demands of such structures. Reading to Kids, for example, is a nonprofit organization that is always looking for volunteers to read to children at schools on the weekends, with no further commitment beyond each day's volunteering. For those who find the networking aspect of bar and alumni associations challenging, volunteering can be a great way to get started in making new connections.

Taking on leadership positions within these organizations is perhaps the fastest way to connect with their members. Further, it indicates leadership skills to both current and prospective employers, which can be a remarkable benefit for a young and/or inexperienced lawyer. However, a new lawyer would be wise to consider the time commitment needed as well as flexibility, if any, that these positions allow. As these organizations are largely made up of those in similar situations—working professionals in Los Angeles—the required meetings are often organized via conference and video calls as opposed to in-person meetings. However, they still require organizational skills as well as the ability to communicate and manage time well. Furthermore, it is important to determine whether these involvements would create conflict issues with one's employer, its clients, or its expectations of the lawyer.

The legal profession can and does seem like a daunting place for a new lawyer, but it does not necessarily have to be. Establishing a strong network of friends and mentors has the potential to make a legal career much more fulfilling and enjoyable. ■

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