

# Focus and flourish!

Simon Tupman explains how a recently established network can address the practice management needs of small practices. Simon is former practising solicitor. He consults to law firms internationally and is the Director of 'Lawyers With A Life', a Byron Bay based legal practice development consultancy. ([www.lawyerswithalife.com](http://www.lawyerswithalife.com))

In 2000, I wrote a book titled 'Why Lawyers Should Eat Bananas'. The book offered the reader ideas on how to achieve a more balanced and profitable practice. I wrote it to assist the many lawyers who appeared to be struggling to come to grips with the changes and challenges of practising as a solicitor.

Since then, those challenges have not diminished. If anything, life as a lawyer has never been tougher. Traditional areas of work are being phased out, competition is on the rise and some firms are struggling to make an acceptable living.

For example the New South Wales Law Society 2003 profile of solicitors in NSW reported a marked increase in sole practitioner firms. It also revealed that around one in three solicitors in firms with between one and four principals earned less than \$50,000 (real take home income after all expenses but before income tax) for the financial year ending 2002. Seeing as firms with between one and four principals account for over 96 percent of firms in private practice, that is a worrying statistic. Readers in the Northern Territory might relate to this where the average number of people per practice is eight.

One of the reasons that I believe many solicitors are finding the road bumpy is that they are not equipped or trained to deal with such a volatile workplace. After all, Law School doesn't teach graduates much in the way of practice management. Nor do many CLE courses. Hence the growth in lawyers and principals attending MBA courses in an effort to get clued up on management techniques.

Relying on your office managers, cashiers or bookkeepers to run your practice is often a risky cop out. These people can be terrific at administration and accounts but often lack the training and experience to take on a full management role within a practice. Hence why many firms who are large

enough to justify the investment are hiring experienced legal practice managers.

Both these responses are doing much to 'professionalise' the management of legal practices. Yet, for many small firms the level of investment in terms of cost and time can be prohibitive and so they continue to do things the way they have always done them. In so doing, they risk becoming obsolete.

Recently, I learnt about a company that has been successfully running practice management networks for small accounting practices who have very similar issues to those facing legal practices. Anzan Professionals is led by a former Coopers and Lybrand partner, David Connell.

As he stated, "many practitioners spend hours of their own time and resources in effect re-inventing the wheel. Chances are that in our networks, someone has already been through the exercise. They enable independent firms to share their ideas through an informal and confidential structure and to develop a very strong edge over local competitors."

I tend to agree with him. Consequently, we have teamed up to provide such a forum for small legal practices. The network is open to firms from throughout Australia and New Zealand. It will offer year round practice management support and idea-sharing among member firms centred around two meetings a year.

Each meeting will include:

- \* an update on issues affecting smaller legal practices
- \* confidential benchmarking of financial performance
- \* group discussions on significant management/leadership challenges and successes
- \* site visits to a local practice (to be confirmed)
- \* dinner, new friendships and relaxation

Ultimately the aim is to assist member firms to improve their strategies, structures, systems, profitability and lifestyle.

I concluded in my book: 'the world is changing and we must learn to adapt. Those who adapt the fastest are those who will benefit the most. The old saying is there are three types of people: those who make things happen, those who watch things happen, and those who wonder what happened.'

My view has not changed.

The first network meeting was held in Byron Bay on 5 and 6 April 2005. For further details please call Ann Montgomery on 02 6921 6695. ①

## Legal Practitioner Part-Time

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