



The Benefits of Being Active in a State Bar Section

By Sueann T. Mitchell

I recall with precision the first time I golfed with my husband. I was a novice golfer at best, having played only a handful of times in my life. My husband, on the other hand, who is a decent golfer by most standards, took on the role of my instructor: “Keep your eye on the ball. Square your shoulders. Transfer your weight from your back to front leg as you swing. Follow through.” The list of instructions went on and on, ending in, “Relax! You are thinking about it too much.”

I couldn’t possibly relax; and most of the time, I couldn’t even connect with the ball. How was I supposed to relax and not think about this long list of disjointed commands that I was expected to somehow magically

combine into one fluid motion for the purpose of driving a ball toward (and eventually putting that ball into) a small hole some 200-plus yards away? I left the golf course that day feeling frustrated, inept, uncoordinated, inferior, and—in a single word—stupid.

That experience more or less describes how I felt my entire first year of practice: in a single word, stupid. Not unlike my husband at the golf course, the experienced, seasoned partners at the private firm where I practice instructed me in marketing myself and in the practice of law: “Network. Blog. Join this organization. Attend this event. Log your hours in real time. Calendar everything. Read every opinion pertaining to your practice area.” Of

course, this list did not end with “Relax!” or anything close to it. Again, I felt myself struggling to somehow sew together all these seemingly disjointed instructions in pursuit of every associate’s goal: logging *lots* of billable hours.

Unlike my golf game (which, for the sake of my marriage, I return to only occasionally), I have incentive to improve in my practice of law. Failure is not an option. And in keeping with my pursuit, I have come to realize that as a novice golfer and a novice lawyer, I failed to see what those who were instructing me already had learned: to be great—or even good—you must be able to see the big picture.

In the practice of law, this realization translates to being willing to spend unbillable hours to achieve greater success. This is a hard pill to swallow for many young lawyers who frantically work to achieve their minimum monthly billing requirements. The mere thought of adding more hours—much less *unbillable* hours—to a week or a month can be downright unnerving. After all, who has time to spend an entire Saturday each month to attend a section meeting? Answer: smart young lawyers who see the big picture.

Young lawyers who are only able to see their immediate goals will only achieve their immediate goals. But this lack of vision prevents otherwise great lawyers from achieving their full potential. Achieving today’s goal of logging a certain number of billable hours is not relevant if you cannot sustain that goal over the long haul. Just as it is not money but the *love* of money that is the root of all evil, it is not billable hours but the *perpetuation* of billable hours that is king in the practice of law. Learning the art of perpetuating billable hours is an essential skill for every young lawyer aspiring to become a seasoned, successful lawyer.

Becoming an active member of a State Bar of Michigan section is an easy and excellent way to hone this essential

lawyering skill. There are 40 different sections of the State Bar covering nearly every practice area of law. Certainly, some sections are more active than others, but every section has something to offer young lawyers. In his book, *Making Partner: A Guide for Law Firm Associates*, John R. Sapp recommends that young associates participate in bar sections, stating, “The potential benefits are significant.”¹ Whether you are a young associate in a large firm striving to become partner or a solo practitioner striving to keep your doors open, the benefits of being active in a section far outweigh the time commitment.

Do not fear that as a young lawyer you have nothing valuable to contribute to a State Bar section. Sapp states that he knows of “no bar association that would not welcome a new contributor.”² In fact, some sections, like the Probate and Estate Planning Section, have been actively seeking young lawyers. Section Chair Amy N. Morrissey said, “The section has been successful in its recent efforts to attract some energetic, talented, younger, and newer members of the bar.”³

Taking the initial steps is easy. By logging on to the Sections page of the State Bar website at <http://www.michbar.org/sections/home>, you can access general information about the various sections, their chairpersons, and members. This page also links directly to each section’s page. If you are not already a member, you can join a section that fits your practice area. The form for adding section membership is available on the Sections home page. Once you have joined a section, you can contact the chairperson or obtain information regarding the locations, dates, and times of council meetings to begin attending meetings.

After regularly attending meetings, you may wish to become more involved in the section by joining specific committees or becoming a council member. As you become more active within the section, you can expect to reap the following benefits.

Learning your practice

At its most basic level, section membership affords you the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of your practice area, the issues affecting your practice area, and how those issues interconnect with other practice areas. As a general rule, section council members are among the most experienced and most passionate people

Fast Facts

Young lawyers who are only able to see their immediate goals will only achieve their immediate goals.

Successful lawyers understand they must be willing to spend unbillable hours to achieve greater success, as it is not billable hours but the *perpetuation* of billable hours that is king in the practice of law.

Becoming an active member of a State Bar of Michigan section is a wise investment of unbillable time for young lawyers who wish to hone their lawyering skills to become successful lawyers.

in their practice areas. Attending section meetings puts you in the same room with great legal minds. Participation aside, merely observing the discussions among the other attendees provides a valuable education in your practice. And, as a lawyer, “[k]nowledge is your stock in trade.”⁴

Networking

Building a large, multifaceted network is essential to good lawyering, and bar activities provide a good way to maintain and grow your network.⁵ Attending section meetings allows you to rub elbows with the best in your practice area. Judges and attorneys convene in the same room to discuss topics relevant to you, your practice, and your clients. You put faces with names—often the same names you see as authors of articles and presenters of continuing legal education sessions. Perhaps more importantly, these same people see *you* and put a name with *your* face. Little by little, bonds form and some of these same colleagues may become your mentors.

Fellow section members are often eager to share their knowledge and experience with young, budding professionals. For me, this benefit has been immeasurably helpful. As the only lawyer in my firm practicing in the area of probate and estate planning, I have turned to section members more than once when faced with a challenging or atypical situation presented by a client.

Staying current with laws and trends that affect your practice

Staying current in your practice area is a never-ending battle. No matter how many opinions and articles you read or how many continuing legal education seminars you attend, it is impossible to know all things at all times related to your practice. Section meetings are like a one-stop shop to learn about the most recent cases, proposed legislation and new laws, and ancillary issues affecting your practice area. Rather than spending countless hours seeking this information, you can access it in one location. More importantly, you will be among the first to know about things affecting your practice area.

Affecting the laws that affect your practice

State Bar sections profoundly influence law at all levels. Members of certain section committees regularly review current legislation to recommend revisions or revocation of existing laws. Those same committee members draft proposed changes, discuss the changes at section meetings, receive approval by the council, and find a

sponsor to propose and hopefully pass the legislation. Additionally, State Bar sections are regularly requested to weigh in on proposed legislation and often have committee members write amicus briefs for pending cases that could profoundly affect that section's practice area.

Becoming a great lawyer

Being active in a State Bar section provides you a necessary tool to becoming a great lawyer by adding value to your work. In his book, *The Essential Book of Great Lawyering*, James A. Durham writes, “if you want to be a great lawyer, then you must think like clients think.”⁶ Durham goes on to explain that clients measure lawyers by the value they add to their work.⁷ As clients see it, every lawyer is expected to provide the legal services for which he or she is retained, but only great lawyers provide added value to their services. Being knowledgeable in your practice area, having a network that includes some of the greatest minds in your practice area, being the first to know of all the latest laws and trends affecting your practice, and affecting the laws that affect your clients all add value to your work that your clients will appreciate. And happy clients are the best referral source for any lawyer—young or experienced.

Time—*unbillable* time—wisely invested in your practice pays dividends in the end. It is part of being able to see the big picture in this profession. Looking past your immediate goals will help you achieve your ultimate goal: the *perpetuation* of billable hours. ■



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ENDNOTES

1. Sapp, *Making Partner: A Guide for Law Firm Associates* (Chicago: ABA Publishing, 2006) p 74.
2. *Id.*
3. Amy N. Morrissey practices in estate planning and administration with Westerman & Morrissey PC in Ann Arbor.
4. *Making Partner*, p 17.
5. *Id.* at 78.
6. Durham, *The Essential Little Book of Great Lawyering* (Dedham: James A. Durham, 2006), p 14.
7. *Id.* at 27.