

# A New Legal Frontier



Edward H. Pappas

“...it behooves us [sic] to adapt oneself to the times if one wants to enjoy continued good fortune.”

—Niccolò Machiavelli

**T**o coin a phrase, the only constant in life is change. Many of us, however, resist change because we get comfortable with the status quo. The legal industry itself has already undergone dramatic change, and we may be on the cusp of a new frontier in the practice of law. Advances in technology, an aging and changing population, difficult economic times, and stiff competition in the legal marketplace—not only from Michigan lawyers, but also from lawyers and other nonlegal professionals worldwide—bring new challenges. Outsourcing of legal work to India and other countries is becoming more prevalent, but the most startling evidence that dramatic change is on the horizon comes from England, which has taken steps to open up the ownership of law firms to nonlawyers.

With all of these challenges, it is easy to think doom and gloom. But all is not doom and gloom in the practice of law in Michigan. The challenges that we are facing actu-

ally present new opportunities for Michigan lawyers. In difficult times, change is inevitable, and during these times, opportunities arise. We need to embrace change and in the words of Niccolò Machiavelli, “adapt [ourselves] to the times...to enjoy continued good fortune.”

In Michigan, our governor is trying to diversify our business base while preserving our current industries. This change will eventually be good for our state and its economy. Lawyers must also diversify their practices, because we cannot continue to sell the same product if nobody is buying. The story of the practice of law over the past 50 years has been the story of moving from a general to a specialty practice. Ironically, the ever-accelerating pace of change in the world may mean that lawyers will have to develop expertise in more areas of law. In other words, general practice, although in a new form, may actually be on the verge of a renaissance of sorts.

The State Bar of Michigan, through its sections and committees, in partnership with the Institute of Continuing Legal Education (ICLE), can help Michigan lawyers become experts in new and emerging areas of the law and thus hone their skills to be as

versatile and successful as possible. Emerging and hot areas of law today include cyber law, bioscience law, energy law (including in Michigan, alternative fuel technology), immigration law, environmental law, intellectual property law, real estate law, health care law, elder law, and Internet privacy law. This list is not exclusive, and changes constantly and rapidly. Legal fields we cannot begin to imagine are sure to emerge. I invite you to take advantage of our educational programs to gain expertise in new and emerging areas of law.

The State Bar can also help Michigan lawyers navigate their way through new and ever-changing technology. As a result of technology, lawyers can practice anywhere in the world, and it is through technology that Michigan lawyers can compete worldwide. One lawyer whom I met from a small firm in northern Michigan has used a blog site to provide potential clients with information about his specialty of the law. He writes articles for clients to read on current issues and has received work from clients all over the world. Other lawyers are using Internet “deal rooms” that let clients monitor who’s doing what on the case, and review documents and costs. Some lawyers are offering clients a subscription service, which gives them private access to an Internet site with legal data banks from which they can educate themselves.

Technology and the Internet have become critical tools for lawyers in practice management and business development. They open up the possibility of virtual alliances with other lawyers, and even other non-legal professionals, to provide full service to clients.

The State Bar Practice Management Resource Center (PMRC) is a central resource for Michigan lawyers to learn about emerging technologies and how to adapt them to

Lawyers must diversify their practices, because we cannot continue to sell the same product if nobody is buying.

their practices. The PMRC is a broad-based clearinghouse and referral source for information and resources necessary to manage a successful law practice. Lawyers and their staff can access forms, guidelines, how-to kits, checklists, and software and hardware vendor information. The PMRC Educational Center, located in the State Bar building in Lansing, is equipped with 12 computer stations, allowing lawyers and their staff to test software applications. The PMRC staff also offers private consultation or training

and an ongoing series of seminars on software applications and practice management. Lawyers can call our dedicated staff for questions or information at the PMRC Helpline at (800) 341-9715 or visit the PMRC website at [www.michbar.org/pmrc](http://www.michbar.org/pmrc).

The State Bar is also looking at other ways to help Michigan lawyers in these difficult economic times. One option is a centralized employment bank for lawyers and law students seeking work and for employers seeking to hire them. We are interested

in any other ideas you may have on how the State Bar can help Michigan lawyers.

Michigan lawyers have adapted very well to changes in the practice of law in Michigan and can compete with the best lawyers in the world. Michigan is a great place to practice law. We are an international border state that houses some of the largest companies in the world. And Michigan is a great place to live and raise a family. Our cost of living is lower than big-market cities like New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Michigan's economy will improve, and those lawyers who stay in Michigan will reap the benefits of a better economy. Entering this new year of significant change, I remain optimistic about the future of Michigan and Michigan lawyers. ■

*I would like to acknowledge and thank SBM Executive Director Janet K. Welch for her contributions to this article.*