



REESTABLISH COLLEGIALITY WITH THE USE OF LISTSERVS

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One of the disadvantages of practicing in a solo or small firm is often the loss of collegiality. At larger firms, one has only to walk down the hallway and plop oneself in another attorney's side chair, or lean against their door frame, and ask an open-ended question like "what kind of strategy would you use given this set of facts . . ." This back and forth exchange between lawyers is an essential part of the process of critical thinking.

In the not-so-distant "old days", attorneys could take the time to attend a multitude of bar functions, and to regularly share leisurely lunches with their peers. These events provided the forum for solo and small firm practitioners to engage in much-needed discussions of strategy and methodology with their peers, and with attorneys from larger firms as well. These events provided, effectively, the collegial network which is inherently built into the infrastructure of larger firms.

It is unfortunate that our day-to-day professional lives have become so hectic and demanding. For many, there is little or no time to devote to attending these types of networking events. In fact, I find that many attorneys now place a very low priority on attending any function that does not provide CLE credit. This is regrettable on many levels. The purpose of this article is not to go into all the reasons why you should increase the priority of attending bar-related functions, although I admit I am a strong proponent of participation in your professional associations. I know from personal experience that you will *always* get more out of it than you put into it. Rather, the purpose of this article is to focus on how to obtain one of the benefits of these events—the networking and exchange of information with your peers—even when you cannot attend these events in person.

The tool to achieve networking and the collegial exchange of information with your peers when you cannot attend bar functions or plan lunches is the use of listservs. To use this tool you will need a computer, modem, telephone line, and Internet Service Provider (ISP) service. You can then use this tool from the comfort of your office or home (or both), 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

What is a listserv? Simply put, it is an internet discussion group comprised of a number of individual subscribers. Discussions are accomplished through the use of email. By sending (“posting”) an email comment or question to the listserv, you are actually sending it to the inbox of everyone who subscribes to the listserv, without having to know or use their individual email addresses.

Individual subscribers can remain anonymous as long as they choose not to publicly respond to any postings, meaning they can “lurk” in the background and benefit from all the questions and answers posted, without anyone but the listserv manager knowing they’re a part of the listserv. Only when one responds to a post publicly, by addressing the response back to the listserv, is he or she recognized by others as a participant.

There is usually, but not always, an option of responding privately to someone’s post, so that only the person you respond to then knows you participate in the listserv. It depends on how the listserv is set up as to whether you can send private responses, or only public ones. Netiquette rules say you should share the wealth and respond publicly, but there are rare instances when this may be inappropriate. For example, if you strongly disagree with a post you may want to express that privately.

For most attorneys, remaining an anonymous participant of a listserv is not an issue, because an open dialogue and exchange of opinion, information, and expertise is the ultimate goal of participation in the listserv. The convenience of posting a question with a single email, and receiving, often within hours, answers and/or opinions from dozens of your peers can be exhilarating for the new participant. And the convenience continues as long as you participate.

The first listserv I recommend to all attorneys from solo or small firms is that run by the Pennsylvania Bar Association. It is called, appropriately, the Solo & Small Firm Section Listserv. You must be a member of the Section to join the listserv. Believe me, it’s worth the meager section dues. I see the information which is exchanged regularly on that listserv. For those who are members, they get way more than their money’s worth. Questions range from substantive points of law, needs for cites, searches for software and consultants, feedback on case strategy, to recommendations on copiers, printers, and on and on. If you practice in a solo or small firm setting and are NOT a member of this listserv, get on it. Section members can subscribe by going to <http://www.pabar.org/listservform.shtml> on the PBA web site.



There are many more listservs out there. There are listservs specific to topics like technology or to specific areas of practice, like personal injury or intellectual property. There are listservs devoted to exchange of information and opinions on specific topics, like ethics and the use of technology, or preservation of natural resources. Some listservs are offered and maintained by ABA, and then there are all the others which are offered through a myriad of sources, none of which require any paid membership on your part.

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