



FROM THE PRESIDENT

Chief Judge Carl E. Stewart

Although frequent attention is given to BigLaw firms, solo practitioners and small firm attorneys make up the bedrock of the legal profession. These attorneys are woven throughout this nation's legal fabric: They are bar association presidents, adjunct law professors, and niche practice area experts. Many have ably argued before the Supreme Court of the United States.

During my time as a state trial judge in my hometown of Shreveport, Louisiana, I developed a heightened appreciation for the unique scheduling demands solo practitioners regularly confront. Although I sat in Caddo Parish (County), many of the attorneys who appeared before me also represented clients in neighboring Bossier and De Soto Parishes, among others. The docket on motions day, initial appearance day, and domestic rule day consistently included BigLaw attorneys, but solo practitioners and small firms made up the majority of the docket. Unlike their BigLaw counterparts, should these lawyers' names appear on the docket in Bossier, Caddo, and De Soto for 9:00 AM that same day, they could not simply ask their law partner or an associate to stand in for them. This conundrum presented these attorneys with a Hobson's choice: potentially draw a judge's ire for their tardiness or make a living by handling client matters during overlapping time periods. With this in mind, and sympathetic to their dilemma, my colleagues and I would often place their cases at the end of the docket list or provide another scheduling alternative. This docket flexibility was more efficient for them, the court, and most importantly, their clients.

Since my time on the state trial bench, technology has played a significant role in mitigating many of these concerns. By allowing a range of services to take place digitally, current practice is aided greatly. Technology designed to enhance legal representation is in a constant state of development. Because a small firm's success often hinges on using emerging technologies, developers are more frequently focusing on accessible products for small businesses. Technology helps these small firms and solo practitioners streamline administrative tasks and focus on the substantive practice of law.

Even with the advent of dynamic technology, solo practitioners and small firms continue to encounter challenges. The time gained by

escaping the "billable hour" for most solo and small firm practitioners is spent catching up on administrative tasks. Many solo practitioners are their own paralegals, administrative assistants, information technology professionals, and marketing directors. How frequently they receive a paycheck, and the size of that paycheck, depends largely on them. And, critically, because they work alone, they do not receive the mentorship that is built into life at a BigLaw firm.

The benefits of mentorships are undeniable. For mentors, this means reciprocating kindnesses that aided them in their early development; for mentees, this means receiving vital guidance in the pursuit of becoming outstanding attorneys. While small firms lend themselves to discussions among new and seasoned attorneys, solo practitioners have to be creative in developing mentors in the legal field. Fortunately, American Inns of Court provide meaningful mentorship opportunities for new attorneys and solo practitioners.

Every day, solo practitioners successfully traverse these obstacles, and frequently, the flipside of these challenges highlight the benefits of being a solo practitioner or small firm attorney. Solo practitioners and small firm attorneys often boast a better work-life balance. Because they are their own bosses, they can focus their practice on the cases that interest them most. For new attorneys, putting up a shingle allows them to meet directly with clients and work their cases from start to finish, instead of assisting in a more limited capacity. This creates a steeper learning curve for new attorneys, which often lends itself to a more streamlined professional development. For many attorneys, both new and accomplished veterans, the attendant benefits of being a solo practitioner comport better with their goals as individuals.

This edition of *The Bench* focuses on the unique challenges the solo practitioner and small firm attorney face while highlighting their vitality. With these attorneys composing 62 percent of the legal profession, I hope this issue provides a springboard for dynamic discussion and meaningful mentorship at your local Inns. ♦