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## Senior Attorneys as Mentors

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## ARTICLE

# SENIOR ATTORNEYS AS MENTORS

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For many senior lawyers like myself, the practice of law is a lifetime commitment, and part of that commitment is a belief in the importance of mentoring. With today's uncertain legal environment and all of the issues revolving around the practice of law, mentoring (the sharing of ideas, experience, and wisdom) takes on a whole new importance.

A wonderful summary of today's mentoring comes from the National Legal Mentoring Consortium:

Mentoring is now, more than ever, essential to the future success of the legal profession. Through mentoring, protégés build practical skills while developing a sense of confidence, identity, and effectiveness in their professional role. Just as importantly, mentoring strengthens our profession by enhancing our sense of community and elevating our standards of competence, ethics, and professionalism.<sup>1</sup>

Given the above context, the purpose of this article and the premise behind it is "senior lawyers," those lawyers in the later stages of their career who often have time and flexibility, are an underutilized resource and, through mentoring, can make a unique contribution to the profession. This senior lawyer group, in most cases, are the baby boomers who attended law school in the late '60s and '70s, a group to which the author of this article belongs.

I will address this topic by providing an account of numerous discussions with senior lawyers and also a brief survey that was presented to some of the top law firms in the Twin Cities.<sup>2</sup> While there were a broad array of

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1. NATIONAL LEGAL MENTORING CONSORTIUM, <http://www.legalmentoring.org> (last visited Sept. 14, 2021). "The purposes of the National Legal Mentoring Consortium are: to encourage mentoring in the legal profession; to provide a venue for the exchange of ideas related to mentoring in the legal profession; to provide resources to aid in the successful creation and operation of mentoring initiatives within law firms, bar organizations, law schools, courts, and other entities within the legal profession." *About the National Legal Mentoring Consortium*, NATIONAL LEGAL MENTORING CONSORTIUM, <http://www.legalmentoring.org> (last visited Sept. 14, 2021).

2. A copy of the survey is attached.

topics discussed in the in-person interviews and some specific questions asked in the survey, this article will center on four primary areas.

1. What is the availability of senior lawyers to participate in mentoring?
2. How have these senior lawyers been utilized, and how do they desire to be utilized?
3. What kind of knowledge and wisdom do senior lawyers generally have, and how can this be imparted or mentored to other lawyers?
4. How do senior lawyers teach inexperienced ones the importance and best practices of networking?

#### I. WHAT IS THE AVAILABILITY OF SENIOR LAWYERS TO PARTICIPATE IN MENTORING?

This question is key, because without availability, the premise of an underutilized resource is faulty. One of the first discussions I had was with John Montgomery, who is a nationally recognized professor and expert in the area of mentoring.<sup>3</sup> He recounted the experience of the South Carolina bar, which began requiring every attorney who passed the bar to immediately have a mentor. This program started in 2011. John made it very clear that this has been a very successful program, and while many of the newly admitted members of the bar had prearranged mentors with the firms they were working for, there were a large number of attorneys, approximately one-third, who did not have jobs or were practicing on their own that needed mentors assigned. A substantial portion of these mentors were senior lawyers. John further recounted the success of this program and how senior lawyers have been particularly effective with this new group of lawyers.

The wide availability of senior lawyers in the South Carolina program is also confirmed by the survey results as to the general availability of lawyers. Specifically, some managing partners said they conscientiously sought out senior lawyers who they felt had more time at this stage of their career than other lawyers in their firm.

On a personal note, I have observed that as lawyers progress in their career, they do less and less actual drafting and reviewing of legal documents and more advising and consulting. They are, in most cases, trusted advisors to their clients and therefore have more insight and flexibility. Usually if they are involved in transactions, they are not the ones to handle deals on a day-to-day basis. If they are litigators, normally a younger lawyer handles the process, and they provide oversight and strategy. Their flex-

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3. John Montgomery, Dean Emeritus of University of South Carolina School of Law and Director of National Legal Mentoring Consortium.

ibility comes from not having to handle a number of matters that have significant time commitments.

In an interview with me, Judie Rush—the director of the Mentor Externship Program at the University of St. Thomas School of Law—emphasized that one of the attorney groups sought out for mentoring are more experienced or senior lawyers. She felt “they had tremendous insight and experience and they could bring so much to the students.”<sup>4</sup>

While the survey was not conclusive, it did seem that most law firms do recognize the value and appreciate the availability of senior lawyers. Very few firms, however, have put together any kind of formal program to utilize this resource.

In conclusion, senior lawyers are certainly available, but this group isn’t always sought out for a mentoring role. They need to: (1) be asked to help, (2) understand the time commitment, and (3) understand their real value.

## II. HOW HAVE SENIOR LAWYERS BEEN UTILIZED, AND WHAT IS THEIR DESIRE TO BE UTILIZED?

One of the people interviewed who seemed to have a great handle on the idea of senior lawyers and mentoring is Jim Erickson, who was the managing partner of Larkin Hoffman for a number of years.<sup>5</sup> Larkin Hoffman, which has been in existence over 60 years, has its roots in some key partners who became strong local and national figures. They established a culture for the firm. Jim was able to learn from the senior lawyers and then, in his role as managing partner, was able to use these founding lawyers to instill the culture of the firm for generations to come. So, one benefit of using senior lawyers as mentors is that the culture of the firm can be perpetuated through them.

Besides carrying out the culture of a firm, almost all the senior lawyers I talked to really seek out the mentoring role because they want to give back through mentoring. It was a very common statement among the mentoring senior lawyers that they get back more than they give.

I also learned that firms need to prioritize senior lawyers for mentoring roles. Unfortunately, in some firms, the senior lawyers I talked to think firms are not pursuing this resource. We have seen the desire for senior lawyers to be involved, but at times the firms are not encouraging them, thinking that they have done their part in their career and leaving this mentoring work to less senior lawyers.

Norm Linnell, a former colleague of mine from the Business Externship program at St. Thomas, makes it clear that we senior lawyers look at

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4. Judie Rush, Director of Mentor Externship Program, University of St. Thomas School of Law.

5. Jim Erickson, attorney and founder of Solomon Strategies Group.

our careers differently: our perspective and the stories we can tell are valuable assets, and to not utilize such assets is a big mistake.<sup>6</sup> Students learn so much from stories and it makes education real.

I found that there is very little training to help lawyers and senior lawyers with mentoring. The lawyers participating in law school mentoring do have training and guidance as to important topics, but training is not the norm, and neither are the fundamentals of coaching, i.e., how do you coach someone; how do you motivate someone; how do you, in general, take an active approach in others' careers? Successful training for mentoring helps trainees understand key issues, such as professional development, branding, and marketing. John Allison, a professional senior lawyer coach/mentor, has made a late career out of teaching, coaching, and mentoring to other lawyers.<sup>7</sup> In his book *The Art of Practicing Law: A Practical Guide for Lawyers*, he does a wonderful job of highlighting the important aspects of law and how young lawyers can be prepared.<sup>8</sup> The book is a true mentor guide from a senior lawyer on mentoring young lawyers.

I found little evidence that there was any follow-up or evaluation as to how mentoring is working for individual mentees. I was blessed with three wonderful mentors, one of whom I was able to interview. I tried to give my mentors feedback over the years; even now, when my mentors are all in their 80s and I am in my late 60s, I still stay involved with each of these individuals and try to give them feedback and show what they have meant to me and how they have really changed my life.

What we can see from the discussion above is that much more needs to be done in order to put together an effective program to utilize senior lawyers.

### III. WHAT KIND OF KNOWLEDGE AND WISDOM DO SENIOR LAWYERS HAVE, AND HOW CAN THIS BE IMPARTED TO OTHER LAWYERS?

Why use senior lawyers in the mentoring process? Knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge and wisdom are gathered through experience with both successes and failures by working through crucibles as well as learning from the praise received over years of practice.

Knowledge about the mentoring process is a true gift to the mentee. It is what I focus on in my mentoring and teaching. The best way to share this knowledge is through actual stories illustrating real-life examples of knowledge gained. For instance, in working with family businesses, I have ob-

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6. Norman Linnell, attorney and Holloran Fellow, University of St. Thomas.

7. John Allison is an experienced lawyer and a certified professional coach. He is the founder of The Coach for Lawyers, LLC.

8. JOHN ALLISON, *THE ART OF PRACTICING LAW: A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR LAWYERS* (2017).

served you must ensure total transparency to members of the family. The lawyer needs to diffuse any dominant and self-serving behavior by a family member. Examples of these types of situations can help a young business lawyer who undoubtedly will be involved with family businesses and who can learn from these examples. Knowledge without examples is very hard to implement for a mentee. I have found in teaching my classes, particularly my class on representing entrepreneurs, that the most effective way I can mentor the students in the process of representing entrepreneurs is to tell real stories. A highly respected lawyer and my mentor, Paul Ravich, who started a very successful firm which merged with a national law firm, Robins Kaplan, explained to me that drawing on all of his years of experience when helping younger lawyers allows him to bring great perspectives to his mentee. He also made it clear that experience is more than legal—it is also business knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

The second attribute that senior lawyers offer is wisdom. As Steve Tourek, an incredibly successful attorney, teacher, counselor, founding firm member, general counsel, and board member said, “wisdom is a gift to the mentee.” The mentor’s role is to “show the value of wisdom and the steps and reflections to obtaining wisdom.”<sup>10</sup> An important component of wisdom is to be able to reflect on the mentor’s purpose in the profession and how he or she can help the mentee embrace that purpose. Wisdom is integral to the continued success of our profession.

#### IV. NETWORKING

The last topic is one of my favorites—networking. I personally have developed over the years, as have most senior lawyers, an extensive network, not just of clients but of people that have been valuable to my success and in my life. As I say in my classes, it is important for each lawyer to have what I call a “tent” and to have key people inside that tent. Networking is something that lawyers need to learn. Lawyers tend to be somewhat introverted, and networking is not always easy. We all talk about marketing to new clients, but as important as client development is, the whole process of building a network of people is the key. Whether the network is clients of other lawyers, people in related professions, or people that are knowledgeable of key topics, ALL are crucial to the lawyer’s practice of law.

Sometimes this networking can be networking within a firm. Large firms have their own networking issues. The profession cannot underestimate the importance of senior lawyers teaching other lawyers how to network. I make networking the foundation of my mentoring, actively introducing my mentees to a wide range of people in my network. We must encourage senior lawyers to share their networks and networking skills.

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9. Paul Ravich, Founder of Ravich Meyer Kirkman McGrath Nauman & Tansey, P.A.

10. Steve Tourek, General Counsel of Marvin Windows and Doors.

Part of networking is also involvement within the legal community. Senior lawyers often spend more time on committees and other areas of the formal legal community than young lawyers. They have extra time, they don't have the billing pressures, and they see it as a commitment that is important if we're going to continue to have a strong profession. Senior lawyers, when mentoring, need to demonstrate a commitment to the legal community.

## V. THE ROLE OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP IN MENTORING

Finally, I would like to propose that senior lawyers seriously look at their role as servant leaders. Part of being a mentor as a senior lawyer is being a servant leader. You are serving the younger lawyers; you are serving the legal community by helping fellow lawyers to grow and deal with issues and crucibles. Mentoring is serving fellow lawyers and, in general, the legal profession; but it needs to be approached as service rather than a path to personal recognition. It must be done out of gratitude for having been able to make a living and make a difference by being a lawyer for many years. There is no better way to show servant leadership than to have a mentor that has demonstrated this in their practice and in life.

## VI. CONCLUSION

I hope the readers, through the limited research, interviews, and observations in this Article, have gleaned five conclusions:

1. There is a significant reservoir of mentoring talent from senior lawyers.
2. Senior lawyers are underutilized.
3. The knowledge and wisdom of senior lawyers is invaluable. Storytelling is an effective way to show knowledge and wisdom.
4. Networking is a skill that can be taught by senior lawyers.
5. It is imperative for the continued success of our profession and the future success of our members that we fully utilize the tremendous resources of the senior lawyer group.

The legal profession has always been a peer-to-peer profession, and to continue this base, we need to constantly seek commitment from lawyers with the gift of wisdom.<sup>11</sup>

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11. For further research, please reference: THE COACH FOR LAWYERS, LLC, <https://www.coachlawyers.com/> (last visited Sept. 20, 2021); *Mentoring*, THE AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION, [https://www.americanbar.org/groups/government\\_public/resources/public\\_lawyer\\_career\\_center/Mentoring/](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/government_public/resources/public_lawyer_career_center/Mentoring/) (last visited Sept. 20, 2021); Robert J. Derocher, *Mentoring Helps New and Experienced Lawyers Make the Connection*, 30 No. 6 BAR LEADER, July-Aug. 2006; IDA O. ABBOTT, *THE LAWYER'S GUIDE TO MENTORING* (2d. ed. 2018).