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## The Dismembering of Bar Associations: An American Tragedy

The next time you receive an invitation to join a bar association or attend one of their events, see this as an opportunity. Besides helping your career, you would be supporting an endangered species.

By **Marc Garfinkle** | December 06, 2019



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Fewer lawyers than ever are joining bar associations and participating in bar-sponsored events. Across the country, membership in non-mandatory associations has been in steady decline for over 10 years, despite the unflagging increase in the number of lawyers available to join. Many associations that can accomplish noble goals are limited by the declining number of attorneys who participate in their programs.

A recent experience prompted this column. Since early this century, the Essex County Bar Association offered meet-and-greet breakfasts at local venues called "The Bar Goes Local." Open to all attorneys at a modest fee, this is always a special event. Superior Court judges, appellate judges and Workers' Compensation judges all come out in numbers. The local municipalities who host these events send many of their officials to make our acquaintance. Typically, they send the judge, court administrator, prosecutor, public defender, some council members, and perhaps the police chief or mayor. It is a networking opportunity of the first order. The same is true of many NJSBA events, such as retirement luncheons and awards dinners, where networking is done with attorneys and judges who would otherwise be far less accessible.

Lawyers share more than stories at these events—we develop friendships and business connections, we learn new tricks of the trade, we hear how others do what we do. We can acquire valuable free advice, a co-counsel, and even a mentor at these breakfasts. For attorneys who go to municipal court, or are seeking political connections, or who just want to meet the local movers and learn the moves, there is no better use of time. How sweet it is on a Monday to conference your case with the judge you met at breakfast on Thursday.

Despite their success, the future of events like this is in jeopardy around the state and around the country. The regulars and the old-timers still come, but there is little "new blood" with whom to network or to meet the generous corporate sponsors who return year after year with their checkbooks. That sponsors are not meeting new people may seal the fate for many such programs.

One can speculate on the reasons for this apparent apathy or aversion to meetings where lawyers “press the flesh” and “shoot the breeze.” It has been observed that the so-called millennial and Gen-X attorneys do not “belong” to groups. They tend to avoid weekly meetings, except perhaps with their therapists, trainers or life coaches. They buy clothing online and would get their hair cut that way, too, if they could. They understand the etiquette of email, but not conversation. They grew up with Google and can zip around Lexis-Nexis for most of their answers. They would rather receive their CLE credits in their closed offices or at home at night via webinar, than to attend a seminar or conference with 100 bustling colleagues.

They can do so. Miracles of technology have enabled us to avoid displacing ourselves to do business, find entertainment, or “meet” new people. Countless professional connections are made each day across electronic platforms between people who are called “friends” and “connections” but have never shaken hands. Old-timers question how one can “know” someone whose voice she has never heard, whose smile she has never seen, or whose eyes have never met hers. To younger lawyers, it is very normal.

A year or so ago, a London Professor of Surgery, aptly named Kneebone, published a fascinating observation that, over the past two decades, medical school graduates have shown consistently declining manual dexterity, thereby limiting their potential as microsurgeons and posing a special problem for the future of health care. He attributed this decline to the infrequency with which those fine motor manual skills had been used by the doctors as younger people. Kids don’t manipulate pencils to write a sentence anymore, and rare is the child who threads a needle or fishhook, or sews or whittles or knits or builds models or plays with clay.

The legal profession, like medicine, is impacted by whatever impacts its practitioners. As the result of diminished inter-human contact, lawyers’ interpersonal skills are diminishing. It is no secret among experienced lawyers that the newer lawyers, like NBA and NFL players, are brasher and more discourteous than their predecessors. This regression is not merely a decline in gentility or manners—it is often pure social ineptitude; some lawyers don’t even know how to speak with each other. They send nasty emails rather than place a phone call, rarely

fearing reprisal, since they will never meet. Real estate conveyances occur without the buyers and sellers ever meeting. Case management and settlement conferences take place by phone and/or email. We no longer have to go to the court or the post office (or other places where lawyers used to run into each other) in order to file a pleading.

We don't even need to speak to a human to apply for a job—at least, at first. We are interviewed by online forms from a firm or an employment website or Survey Monkey, without leaving our living room. We never hear nuances that might be carried on the voice of the hiring partner. We don't get to study the other person's face for signs or unspoken words. To make it worse, the search engines reward us for being “the best” and for garnering awards; thus, we learn to see our colleagues as competitors, and we treat them that way.

The interface of technology and the legal profession is complex. We are seeing how technology can affect a lawyer's ability to relate to clients, courts and colleagues. Although this is a growing epidemic, remedies appear daily in our inboxes. The next time you receive an invitation to join a bar association or attend one of their events, see this as an opportunity. Consider your own skills set and your professional needs, consider the value of membership or the event, and sign up. Besides helping your career, you would be supporting an endangered species.

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