

THE PRACTICE MANAGER

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A NEWSLETTER PROVIDED BY THE LAW PRACTICE MANAGEMENT PROGRAM
OF THE STATE BAR OF TEXAS

THE TECHNOLOGY ROUNDUP

Gerry Morris, J.D.

Your Next Computer, Buy or Build?

If you had looked around my law offices seven or eight years ago you would have seen about ten PCs networked in a peer to peer arrangement. Most would have been running Windows 98 with at least one loaded with Windows 2000. The Windows 2000 machine would have been my file server. Most, if not all, of the computers would have been built by yours truly. Most would have been put together from parts scavenged from earlier models with slower processors. As the new faster processors came out I would buy a new motherboard and processor, swap them out with the old ones keeping the same video card, sound board, network cards and hard drives from the previous incarnation. With Windows 98, I could usually just start the upgraded computer and the operating system would reconfigure itself to accommodate the new hardware.

For all its ease of configuration, Windows 98 had its definite drawbacks. Chief among its shortcomings was its frequent crashes. The NT based workstation operating systems, Windows NT, 2000, and XP were much more stable. In my opinion Windows 2000 was the first really usable business workstation operating system from Microsoft. It was extremely stable and ran enough applications and peripherals to make it practical. However, the switch to Windows 2000 in my office ended the practice of upgrading my computers each time a faster chip came

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THE COACH'S CORNER

Debra Bruce, J.D.

To Improve Your Firm, Look in the Mirror

I attended a managing partner roundtable recently. In the course of the discussion I asked how many had ever used 360 degree feedback in their law firm. A couple of hands went up. One brave soul said, "What is 360 degree feedback?" Several nodded their heads or murmured that they were wondering that, too.



What Is 360 Degree Feedback?

360 degree feedback is a skills development tool which involves surveying the people above, below and around you to get their perceptions about your behavior and the impact of your behavior. The process may also be called multi-rater assessment, multi-source feedback or full circle appraisal.

It usually involves the supervising attorneys, practice group leader, and team or project leader, as well as colleagues, partners or peers within the firm who work with you or otherwise have ample opportunity to observe your behavior and your work product. The associates and staff who report to you or otherwise work with you also rate your behaviors and competencies, and feedback from clients might also be sought. The process usually seeks feedback on a confidential, anonymous basis.

The Purpose of Feedback

Several of you may be feeling a chill run down your spine just reading about this. You may be thinking, "Ask my clients what they think of me? Give associates a chance to mouth off about me? Set myself up for potshots from my partners? Let my staff give me a performance review? Are you crazy?" Most of us, however, secretly wish to know how others see us. This is a development tool that will help you become more proficient at the behaviors that lead to the results you want. Stated another way, this process can help you learn how to get out of your own way, while providing encouragement to continue doing

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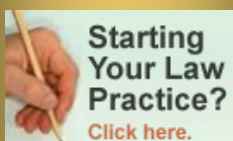
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your law practice



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what really works.

The corporate world has been using 360 degree feedback for decades. Jack Welch, the legendary former CEO of General Electric Company, was quoted as saying, "Any company that's going to make it ...has got to find a way to engage the mind of every single employee. If you're not thinking all the time about making every person more valuable, you don't have a chance. What's the alternative? Wasted minds? Uninvolved people? A labor force that's angry or bored? That doesn't make sense." Making any lawyer or staff member more valuable requires feedback to them. Giving them the opportunity to provide feedback to others (especially upwards) helps to keep the workforce engaged.

Research on the Critical Role of Managers

Many law firms now suffer from costly attrition among their young attorneys and staff, as well as partners. "People leave managers, not companies," say Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman, authors of *First, Break all the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently*. Their conclusion is based on research studies conducted by the Gallup Organization involving over a million employees and eighty thousand managers in a broad range of industries. "How long that employee stays and how productive he is while he is there is determined by his relationship with his immediate supervisor," assert Buckingham and Coffman. They discovered that managers, not pay, benefits or perks, are the critical factor in building a strong workplace.

If you give work assignments to anyone, you are a manager to that person. Are you willing to consider the possibility that you may be contributing to the problems your law firm experiences? Are you getting the results you want, including the retention of talented lawyers and staff? If not, how can you make the right shifts, if you are unclear about the impact of your current choices and behaviors? Candid feedback can provide the guidance you need.

Benefits to the Law Firm

The firm as a whole will benefit from a properly conducted 360 degree feedback program. Some of the benefits reported include:

- Provides individuals a broader perspective on how they are perceived by others and how they positively and negatively impact others
- Reinforces the desired competencies in the law firm
- Increases awareness by senior management that they also have areas for development and improvement
- Identifies key development areas for individuals, practice groups, support arenas and the firm as a whole
- Multiple raters enhance the recipient's perception that feedback is valid and objective, leading to more willingness to accept and act upon the feedback
- Fosters a climate of continual improvement in management and other skills
- Identifies strengths in individuals for optimal benefit to the firm
- Highlights the responsibility of an individual for his/her own career development
- Reveals training needs in the organization
- May reduce discrimination risk by getting feedback from multiple raters in varied job functions

Ultimately, the long term benefits of feedback from multiple sources can be increased productivity, improved talent retention, reduced conflict, more effective management, and progress towards the law firm's larger goals. The success of the feedback program depends on what the firm and the recipients do with that feedback, however. If poorly implemented, a feedback program can produce negative results.

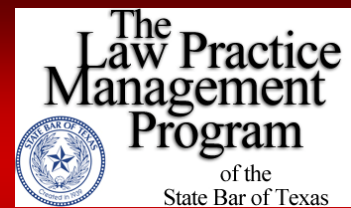
In a future article we'll go into more detail about what a 360 degree feedback program looks like, and discuss tips on implementing such a program. In the meantime, you can still employ the old-fashioned way. Consider asking those around you, including peers, direct

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on the Market.

During the installation process, Windows 2000, and later XP, installed only the hard disk controller driver and other essential drivers necessary for your individual computer rather than an array of generic and specific drivers. This meant that if the motherboard was changed, the computer would no longer boot, unless the new motherboard was virtually identical to the replaced one. So, if I upgraded a computer's motherboard, I also had to start over with a new installation of the operating system and software applications. I was never able to find a way to work around for this problem. There were some software applications available to transfer programs from an old computer to a new one, but not to make an upgraded computer boot.

Also, the price of new PCs continued to fall. In the past few years it just hasn't been worth it for me to build workstation computers. The basic workstation in my office is whatever PC Dell had on sale at the time I needed to add or replace a computer. I would order them with the current version of Microsoft Office installed, and basic hardware peripherals. It doesn't take much video power to adequately display Microsoft Office, nor is a super sound system important. I have one PC with above average video and sound for video editing. The rest are as bland as they come. I do order extra RAM. We usually have several applications running at once on any given desktop. The more RAM, the better the performance with multiple applications open. The price of a Dell on sale was significantly lower than anything I could build. Michael Dell buys in larger volume than I.

However, I will probably continue to build the PC I use for a server. Here, I am picky about getting just what I want and no more. The server I use now has been running 24/7 for about five years. It's time to start thinking about constructing a replacement.

It's really very easy to build a PC, and it's gotten easier over the years. Ten years ago, most motherboards did not include onboard video, sound or network interfaces. I had to install peripheral boards to add these functions. Now, since chips continue to get smaller, it is standard to load up a motherboard with all the basics. So, the place to start is with locating a motherboard that has what I want and accepts the type of CPU chip adequate for my needs. I would make sure it has onboard video, sound and network interface. Video and sound quality is not important for a server so I wouldn't pay a premium for high end boards intended for gaming and multimedia. I would

start by looking in the paper and finding the sales at places like Fry's or Best Buy.

For a server I want adequate horsepower, but not necessarily the newest, fastest CPU (Central Processing Unit) chip. Having bought several over the years I've learned that there is a significant price jump from the next fastest to the very fastest chip. I want to be sure and get a processor chip that is more than adequate to run the software that will reside on the server. I would check the minimum requirements for applications such as Amicus Attorney and overshoot the minimum requirements by as much as I want to spend. Five years from now that chip will look pretty slow. The motherboard box will tell me what types of chips may be used. There are several different configurations of processor chips from two major manufacturers, Intel and AMD. I have used chips from both over the years and haven't noticed any difference when matched with the proper motherboards. I personally think AMD offers more bang for the buck. A cooling fan for the processor chip is also essential.

Sometimes the CPU chip is sold already mounted on a motherboard. This should mean that the chip is one recommended for that motherboard. It also means that I can't bend the pins on the chip while installing it or otherwise mess up mounting the chip. Fortunately, that's hard to do now since they all are made so that they will only go in the correct way. Years ago, they would go more than one way and the result of putting them in the wrong way would be instant destruction of the chip when powered up. When putting on the cooling fan it's important to use the gooey stuff that comes with it. This serves as a heat transfer medium between the chip and the fan. Nowadays, chips run

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UPCOMING EVENTS

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reports and supervisors, questions like "What suggestions do you have for me?" and "How can I help you be your most effective?"

Debra Bruce (www.lawyer-coach.com) practiced law for 18 years before becoming a professionally trained Executive Coach for lawyers. She is Vice Chair of the Law Practice Management Committee of the State Bar of Texas, and board member and past leader of Houston Coaches Network, the Houston Chapter of the International Coach Federation. She welcomes your questions and comments at debra@lawyer-coach.com.

LAW PRACTICE MANAGEMENT TIP

Management Tips are provided by the State Bar of Texas and ABA Practice Management Advisors. The tips are not meant as legal advice, nor binding on the State Bar of Texas or the ABA.

Did you know that it is a good idea to provide your client with a "We Do-You Do List?" The list describes the obligations of the law firm and the client during the course of the matter.

Examples are:

We Do Items

- Take your calls
- Do our best to advocate your case
- Do our best to solve problems as they come up
- Advise you of the maximum settlement for your case
- Tell you whenever the other side makes an offer of settlement

You Do Items

- Be honest with the Court and us
- Be reasonable in the number of calls you make to us
- Read what we send to you
- Follow all Court Orders
- Pay your bill

Your experience with many clients will fill in many more items. Putting what you will do in writing reassures the client and highlights everyone's professional obligations.

pretty hot, so the cream is essential to prevent overheating.

Also, keep in mind that older operating systems may not work well with the newer multicore processors. For instance, I run Windows 2000 Advanced Server as my server operating system. I am told that this operating system will recognize each core of the processor as a separate processor. While that will work to some extent, newer software is written to handle the advanced processors more efficiently and take full advantage of their sophisticated features. If I upgrade, I will probably purchase a new operating system. More about that in a minute.

For a server I would choose a motherboard with onboard RAID capability. Simply put, this allows me to connect two hard drives and have one be the mirror image of the other. If one hard drive fails, the other takes over. I simply have to replace the bad hard drive. The system then again mirrors one to the other. My current server does this through the operating system rather than via hardware. The result is the same. I keep a spare hard drive and have had to use one a couple of times. It's the best first line of defense for data protection.

Also, I would buy about twice as much RAM as the software specs call for. Over the years the consistent trend for software is that each upgrade uses more RAM. I can buy it now or wait and risk that the particular type of RAM used by the motherboard will be hard to find a few years from now when I desperately need it. The motherboard box will tell me what type of RAM the motherboard accepts and in what sizes.

The motherboard with the CPU, RAM and cooling fan fastens into a case. There are hundreds of different types of cases ranging from the generic to the absurd. I go for the generic. I would need to buy a case that would accommodate the motherboard configuration and footprint and would conveniently accept two hard drives and a CD drive. Beyond that, size isn't a consideration.

I would install two identical hard drives for the redundant RAID system and a CD drive for use to install software. Hard drives keep getting bigger and faster. I have two 80 meg hard drives that store five years of my practice. So far I've used about 1/4 of their capacity. Here, I would buy whatever is on sale. The average drive now is over 200 meg. The CD drive will probably be the one I have on a shelf in my closet. Nothing has changed over the years for basic CD drives other than speed.

Once all the parts are put together according to the instructions accompanying the motherboard and case (it really is easy), and the mouse, keyboard, monitor, network cable, etc. are connected, I'm ready to install the operating system. When I buy a new motherboard, processor or hard drive, I am entitled to buy the operating system and some other types of software at OEM prices. (Original Equipment Manufacturer). The savings are significant. Network operating systems are about half price OEM compared to retail.

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I would first fire up the new computer without the software installation disk and tweak the settings in the BIOS according to the instructions included with the motherboard. Setting up the RAID redundant drive system is also accomplished through the BIOS in accordance with the motherboard's included instructions. Then the operating system disk goes into the CD drive and the system rebooted for installation. (The BIOS has to be set to allow the system to boot from the CD drive). Most bookstores have books that take you step by step through configuring the operating system to do what I want it to do. For instance, my current is set up to accept VPN connections over the Internet. The documentation that comes with the software won't be as useful as an aftermarket book.

If you decide to build a computer, you can be assured that you have what you need to run your server-based software and perform the other functions important to your network setup. You can include everything you need but nothing that you don't need, such as trial software to cause pop-ups and take up disk space. There is also no software hidden in the installation that sends marketing data to software vendors. Besides all that, it's something to do that is a nice temporary diversion from the practice of law.

E. G. "Gerry" Morris is a small firm practitioner and has practiced law for over 29 years in Austin, Texas. He is certified as a Criminal Law Specialist by the Texas Board of Legal Specialization. His firm web site is at www.egmlaw.com. Email your comments and questions to Gerry at tech@egmlaw.com.

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