



Lovely Dhillon

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Doing Business

A new program gives sole practitioners basic business skills.

TAKE A LOOK AT THIS MONTH'S STATE BAR Discipline Report, and you'll see no shortage of attorneys who failed to properly maintain their client trust account records.

But that's just one of many career-threatening mistakes young lawyers make when running their own practices, says Jerome Fishkin, a former State Bar prosecutor who represents attorneys in discipline cases. "There's a myriad of details," the San Francisco sole practitioner says. "It's easy to get in over your head when you're new."

Young lawyers overbill clients, misrepresent themselves in ads and on the Web, skip court deadlines, screw up conflict checks, and botch cases—all because they don't understand the practical side of the practice of law.

Lovely Dhillon wants to help.

Recently, she opened the national office of the Law School Consortium Project in San Francisco to train solo and small-firm lawyers to be better business people.

"Our mission is to increase legal services and access to justice," says Dhillon, executive director of the proj-

ect and a former San Francisco deputy district attorney. "Within that, we're supporting solo and small-firm practices so they can have viable, ethical practices in the community."

Once they have the skills to make their practices more profitable and efficient, Dhillon says, young lawyers will make fewer mistakes and be more willing and able to take "low bono" cases, by which she means representation for those not eligible for free legal services but not able to pay full legal fees.

Central to Dhillon's plan is having law schools offer business courses to their students and alumni. The schools would also create an online network for their alumni to share law practice management tips and referrals, and provide group discounts for online research services and malpractice and health insurance.

"We're building a virtual community of solo and small-firm practitioners," Dhillon says.

The Open Society Institute's Program on Law & Society originally funded the Law School Consortium

Project in 1997. City University of New York School of Law (CUNY) was one of the first schools to join the project, and now CUNY has 150 participants in its program. Ten other schools, mostly on the East Coast, have since fashioned their own online networks.

This is the first time the project has come to California though. It's also the first time schools are hatching plans to create regional networks. Under those proposals, neighboring schools would share the cost of putting on events and creating the online network.

Jeffrey Brand, dean of the University of San Francisco School of Law, proposes to start a two-year pilot project for Bay Area law schools later this year. As they are now, he notes, law schools provide few services to solo and small-firm practitioners.

A business owner before she enrolled at Empire College School of Law in Santa Rosa, Angelina Nessinger thought it would be easy to translate her business expertise into her new law practice, which she opened in 2002. "I thought with my background, it would be a piece of cake," she says. "It's not."

Taking practical business courses and finding mentors is "almost imperative," she adds, "because we're out here flailing and reinventing the wheel on a daily basis." —Erik Cummins