The legal industry is bracing itself for the onset of a worldwide multidisciplinary practice (MDP) environment in which law firms will face fierce competition from accounting and consulting firms for client work and begin diversifying to provide a variety of nonlegal services to the public. In recent years, the Big Five accounting firms have been establishing a presence in the overseas legal market with the perspective that they will eventually enter the legal field in the United States also. Approximately 5,000 lawyers are already practicing in accounting firms today. Law firm business expansion and this powerful effort by the Big Five accounting firms and other nonlawyer-owned organizations may well become a reality about which legal assistant managers should be knowledgeable so that they may prepare themselves and their legal assistants for rapid change.

**What Is Multidisciplinary Practice**

In a MDP environment, accounting and consulting firms may enter the legal profession, expanding to become resource centers at which lawyers, accountants, insurance companies, banks, etc., deliver a variety of services under the same roof. Under this set-up, organizations which are owned fully or in part by nonlawyers will engage in the provision of legal services to clients for fees. Simultaneously, the legal profession will find itself expanding to include traditional nonlawyer services as nonlawyers enter the legal practice. Supporters of the MDP movement believe its benefits will be significant, affording clients the following:

- One-stop shopping for a wide range of services;
- Dramatic cost reductions in the delivery of professional services;
- Case matter management with high leverage; and
- Far higher levels of automation and technology support.

The State Bar of Arizona’s Board of Governors has approved a plan which would enable lawyers to share fees and form partnerships with nonlawyers. By the fall of 2000, requests for ethical rule changes will be submitted by the Board to the Arizona Supreme Court for final approval. (To read the State Bar’s recommendations on the Internet, access www.azbar.org/AttorneyResources/mdp.cfm.)
Issues of Concern

MDP has been the subject of hot debate among American Bar Association (ABA) members. Opponents are concerned about the following:

- Deregulation of the legal profession;
- Preservation of the attorney-client privilege;
- Fee-sharing with nonlawyers; and
- Unauthorized Practice of Law (UPL).

In a 314 to 106 vote against multidisciplinary practices on July 11, 2000, the ABA House of Delegates sent a strong message to state bar associations and other agencies which regulate the legal industry that they should prevent lawyers from sharing fees with nonlawyers or giving to nonlawyers ownership or control over law firms in order to “preserve the core values of the profession.”

Concerned about national and international competition from MDPs, many law firms are planning now to be in a position to compete. Predictions are that law firms will seek to gain competitive strength through mergers or by acquiring other firms in strategic worldwide locations. Another option would be for the law firm to offer accountants and other professionals the ability to become partners of the firm, thereby becoming an MDP itself. Some law firms have already taken an aggressive approach by establishing ancillary businesses in such areas as technology, international trade, health care, finance, human resources, literature, governmental affairs, and real estate.

International Expansion Due To Globalization of Markets

International trade barriers are falling, resulting in increased international trade and commerce opportunities. Technical assistance programs that advance and support the legal industry are being created. Through the ABA, lawyers are assisting in the development of nations. The Central and East European Law Initiative (CEELI) provided pro bono technical and legal assistance to 24 countries, and the Asian Law Initiative Council (ALIC) will assist and support China with legal reforms. Additionally through the ABA, there are legal entities which are providing help in other countries around the world, and the next focus will be on Africa and South America. Predictions are that a global legal standard may be established, modeled on the U.S. system. If that is the case, U.S. organizations which provide legal services will undoubtedly battle for foreign clients.

Technology

Theoretically, more organizations will be based on “e-lawyer” practice around the world, around the clock, servicing the needs of a global economy -- especially over the Internet. A growing number of courts are expected to accommodate electronic filing, online records, video conference trials, and fax signatures. Along with this, clients will expect more instant response through virtual networks and repositories; and lawyers will be encouraged to develop clients and deliver legal services through technology, virtually maintaining their offices online. Law firms will have to take rapid steps forward technologically in order to catch up with accounting and consulting organizations which are considered to be well ahead on the electronic curve.

Impact On Lawyers, Legal Assistant Managers, and Legal Assistants

Proponents for MDP believe that lawyers, legal assistant managers, and legal assistants must adjust to and embrace MDP for future success because it is inevitable. It will allow lawyers to focus on legal work and provide them with non-traditional business opportunities to become more profitable. They will need to consider administrative structural changes to handle their multiple business affairs, which could create more careerpathing opportunities for legal assistant
managers. In order to survive, law firms will have to produce a superior, competitively priced product; and the legal assistant will be essential to this process. Highly specialized, technologically advanced legal assistants will be in demand; and their knowledge base will be heightened by the diverse learning opportunities which will develop in the MDP. Legal assistants may need to do the following to stay on top:

- Compete for work with untrained legal assistants by being the best resource;
- Promote innovative ways to accomplish work as case staffing becomes lean due to price competition;
- Become “knowledge workers” through regular CLE and technical training; and
- Develop strong client-relations skills to cement client loyalty.

As the following trends emerge, legal assistants and their managers will need to look closely at how they will handle certain aspects of MDP:

- Increased travel requirements as organizations become multi-national;
- Provision of client services via the Internet;
- Greater need for bilingual skills; and
- Twenty-four hour global operations and the availability of people to work at home and at the office. Law firms will need to take a closer look at telecommuting, child care and elder care issues.

Needless to say, individual state bar associations and other agencies which regulate the legal industry have a huge responsibility before them in determining whether or not they will approve the concept of MDP and, in doing so, tackling all the complex ethical issues stemming from it.

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