

# THE FLORIDA BAR BEST PRACTICES FOR EFFECTIVE ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION



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## Foreword by Gregory W. Coleman

One of my priorities as president was to help our Florida Bar members embrace technology. Electronic communication dominates the way in which we interact today. E-mails, text messages and social media are all effective new ways to communicate with our clients, build our practices and educate ourselves on the law. Lawyers can no longer operate in the time “B.C.” (Before Computers) but must embrace the “A.D.” (After Devices) age in their practices.

During my year as president, I asked the Bar to publish “The Best Practices for Effective Electronic Communication,” as a guide and resource for our members. This manual is intended to help all Florida lawyers. Whether you are starting out or have been practicing for many years, these guidelines will help you flourish in the A.D. age.

We must be aware of the ways technology, and how we communicate, can create ethical, legal and professional issues. Some of what is contained in this guide is common sense; all of it has important ramifications for Florida’s lawyers trying to understand not only the best way to use technology, but the best way to protect themselves.

The use of technology in the practice of law requires a new approach to time management and the need to follow “e-etiquette,” using courtesy and respect in electronic communications. You may violate the Rules Regulating The Florida Bar if you don’t devote attention to these essential elements.

There are many Rules of Professional Conduct, Professionalism Expectations and sound business practices that apply to the way lawyers and law firms communicate. These apply to electronic communications, just as they apply to other modes of communication. Resources for additional information and guidance are included in this guide.

The Florida Bar desires to serve all of its members, and we hope that you find these Best Practices useful.

Sincerely,



Florida Bar President 2014-2015

### Resource:

*ABA requires lawyers to understand technology*, By: Gina M. Sansone and Howard J. Reissner (New York Journal 2013)

## I. Communication

Oxford Dictionaries defines communication as: “The imparting or exchanging of information or news” or, alternatively, “The successful conveying or sharing of ideas and feelings.”

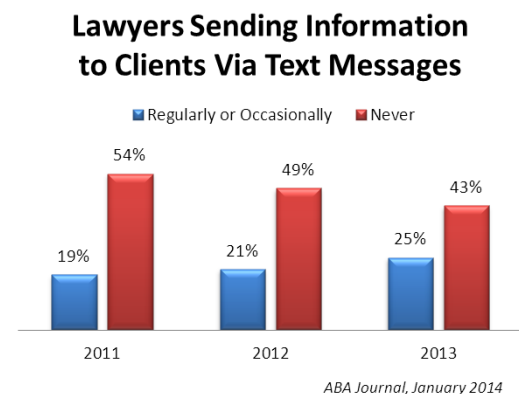
Lawyers use multiple forms of communication on a daily basis to diligently advocate and are in a constant state of communication with clients, opposing counsel, the court and colleagues. This guide provides best practices for the most popularly used forms of electronic communication.

The Oath of Admission to The Florida Bar includes a pledge of “fairness, integrity and civility, not only in court, but also in all written and oral communications.”

## II. Texting

Texting has become a common form of communication, and a level of basic etiquette is required. It is best practice to:

- Keep texts short. More than 160 characters means that a telephone call or e-mail is the better way to deliver your message. Think of texts as preludes or follow-ups to conversation, not the conversation itself.
- Because of the brevity of most texts, your tone can be misunderstood by the recipient. Texts are best left for general messages such as, “I will be arriving at mediation in less than five minutes” or “Our conference call will start at 2 p.m.”
- Texting is the most informal form of communication. If the message is important, deliver it in person or via e-mail. Do not use texting to resolve a situation that went sour or to air frustrations, anger or any other negative emotion.
- Never use texting lingo or shorthand. Spell out all words to eliminate confusion. Never use ALL CAPS; it can be read as the equivalent of yelling. Check your spelling; the auto correct will often change words that you intend to use into words that you did not intend to use.
- Do not assume the recipient has your name stored. End texts with your name and affiliation (i.e. Susan Doe, Drake and Drake Law Firm).



- If the matter is not resolved with the exchange of 2-3 texts, it is probably better to communicate face-to-face or by e-mail or telephone. Be sure you have permission to text the person. Just because the person provided a cell phone number does not mean you have permission to text.



- Do not text while in the company of others or social settings (be aware of Rule 4-1.6 Confidentiality) or in business meetings or court proceedings. Do not text while driving or send a text to someone who you know is driving.
- Respect the time of others. Do not send text messages to clients, opposing counsel or others involved with legal matters outside of normal business hours (8 a.m.-5 p.m.) unless you have permission. Be mindful of time zones.
- The Florida Bar Board of Governors has determined that texts sent unsolicited to potential clients are a form of written communication that must comply with the requirements of Rule 4-7.18(b), and that lawyers who send text solicitations should ensure that recipients are not charged for text solicitations, that text solicitations comply with all state and federal law, including FCC regulations, and that recipients are permitted to "opt out" of receiving text solicitations.

### **Technology Considerations of Texting**

- Texts are not temporary. Text messages can be saved on a cell phone within the actual conversation or on a smartphone by simply taking a screenshot of the conversation. These captured text messages can be forwarded to other recipients or exported off the device.
- Text threads can be altered. Most smartphones allow users to delete individual text messages in a thread/conversation. Do not assume the thread you are seeing, reading or sending will remain intact.
- When dealing with text messages related to a client, you should be familiar with the backup policies, methods, retrieval, metadata, etc. that texting service providers and devices employ for retaining and destroying sent and received text messages.

Use sound judgment when texting. Although texting is an easy and quick form of communication, lawyers should consider whom they text and whom they receive texts from. Responding to clients via text could consume a large part of your day if you do not control communication.

## Resources:

*Texting Etiquette – Everyone Should Know These Rules of Texting*, By: Karen Anise  
*Seven Ways to Text with Graciousness and Savvy*, By: Maralee McKee

### III. E-mail

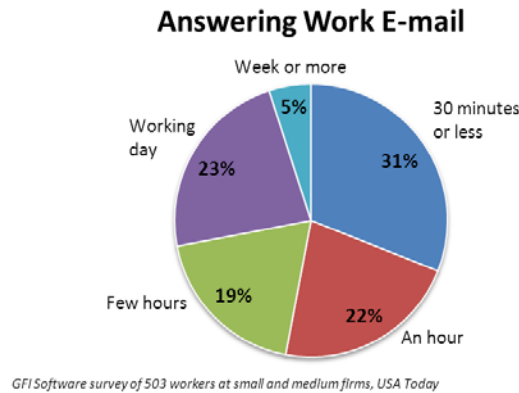
E-mail is a quick and convenient way to connect with clients, colleagues, the court system and opposing counsel. It is not a good substitute for face-to-face contact and telephone calls for interpersonal communication. E-mail messages may become part of a court record and may be subject to disclosure to third parties. Compose e-mail messages in the same manner and with the same good judgment that you would employ for any other communication. It is best practice to:

- Use a descriptive subject line; never leave the subject line blank.
- Use a salutation. Make no assumptions about the receiving party's gender. Using someone's first name generally resolves the problem. Another idea is skipping the salutation altogether and starting with "Good morning/Good afternoon."
- Be courteous. As with any other form of business correspondence, e-mail messages should be written using courtesy and respect – two hallmarks of professionalism. Do not employ rude or facetious remarks that could be deemed unethical, unprofessional, defamatory or prejudicial (Rule 4-8.4(d)).
- Don't use ALL CAPS. It can be read as shouting and makes your e-mail difficult to read.
- Check, revise and edit your e-mail. Do not ignore the basics of writing, punctuation and spelling. Watch your tone. Avoid slang, jargon and abbreviations. Be succinct without coming across as rude.
- Sign your e-mail. Include information such as your telephone number, position, location and e-mail address. Different signatures for different recipients may be appropriate. For example, shorter signatures may suffice for e-mail to internal colleagues.
- Appropriately use "cc." A "cc" (carbon copy) suggests that the message is for information only; no action is necessary on the part of the "cc" recipients. Send carbon copies only to those who need a copy.
- Appropriately use "bcc." Use blind carbon copies with caution. They may give the appearance that you are going behind a person's back.
- Use attachments for long messages or when special formatting is necessary. The attachment should not contain unnecessary graphics (such as letterhead or logos) or embedded multimedia.

E-mail can be unforgiving. Recalling an e-mail that already may have been read by the unintended party only calls more attention to the original message, your mistake and your attempts to undo it. E-mail should not be used to resolve conflict or to say things that would not be said in person.

### A. Replying to E-mail

Colleagues expect prompt responses to e-mail questions. A recent survey produced the following results:



It is best practice not to leave the sender hanging. If you cannot send a full response in a reasonable time, it is best practice to send a quick reply stating that you have received the message and give an estimate of when you will provide a more detailed response.

It is also best practice to use “Reply to All” only when appropriate. Typically, you should address a reply only to a single person and not to all those who received the original message. Likewise, be careful when replying to a message that was sent by a bulletin board or automatic remailer. Your reply may be sent to the entire audience subscribing to the bulletin board.

As a matter of both courtesy and efficiency, include the original e-mail when replying. It avoids making the sender search for the original message and avoids confusion. Where your reply is relevant to only a portion of the original message, consider excerpting and including in your reply only the relevant portions.

**Note:** The previous information is from *Employee Use of the Internet and E-Mail: A Model Corporate Policy with Commentary on Its Use in the U.S. and Other Countries*, edited by David M. Doubilet and Vincent I. Polley. This excerpt from “Model Guidelines and Policy” was contributed by Vincent I. Polley, Schlumberger Limited. Copyright 2002 by the American Bar Association.

## **B. Rules for E-mail Discussion Groups**

Group e-mail discussions on listservs are meant to stimulate conversation, not create contention. Here are best practices for navigating the realm of listservs:

- Do not post anything in a message that you would not want the world to see or that you would not want anyone to know came from you.
- Be aware that advertising rules apply to commercial messages or promotional information regarding yourself or your firm that is posted on the listserv (Rule 4-7.11).
- Do not post messages to all members of the list disparaging the system of justice or any individual who is a part of the system of justice. (Rule 4-8.2(a).)
- Do not use a listserv to vent about the particulars of a case (Rule 4-1.6; also, Rule 4-3.6 Trial Publicity and Rule 4-3.5 Impartiality).
- Do not post any information or other material protected by copyright without the permission of the copyright owner.
- Do not challenge or attack others. Let others have their say.

## **C. Responding to an Angry E-mail**

As e-mail has made it easier for people to communicate with lightning-fast efficiency, it also has made it easier for people to forget about civility. What do you do when you are the recipient of an angry e-mail? How do you keep the situation from escalating? It is best practice to:

- Step away from the computer. An angry e-mail will usually trigger your own anger. Never reply to the e-mail right away; it will only escalate the issue.
- Identify the facts in the e-mail. Does the writer have a reason to be angry? Did you say or do something that legitimately offended the person? Be objective.
- Evaluate what the writer got wrong. Did the writer misinterpret a letter or get the wrong information?
- Put yourself in the writer's shoes. What kind of response would you expect? Understanding the writer's perspective will aid in your response.
- Verify all the facts and fix what you can before writing back. Being able to state in your reply that you already have taken action will go a long way toward resolving the issue.
- Begin your reply with positives. Explain where the writer was right and how you understand why the writer is upset. Explain what has been done to fix the problem, and apologize if necessary.
- Once you provide the positives, ease into explaining where the writer was wrong. Do not get emotional or confrontational. Avoid name-calling, placing the blame, and sarcasm. State your side of the issue. If it was a misunderstanding, try to interject that you understand what caused it.



- Do not be afraid to give consequences. If the business relationship cannot continue, say so. Be straightforward so it does not sound like a threat. Don't make ultimatums if you cannot or will not follow through. Do not threaten to file a Bar complaint or seek criminal prosecution, as these violate Rule 4-3.4(g) and (h).
- Be respectful and civil, even if the writer failed to show you the same respect.
- Think about how permanent e-mails are. They can be forwarded, printed and shared. Make sure you are prepared to stand by your words; do not write anything you might regret later.
- Save records of the correspondence. It is easier to defend yourself later if you have proof.

A lawyer should be mindful of Florida Bar Rule 4-8.4 Misconduct when engaging in an angry e-mail exchange. In addition, review Rule 3-4.3 Misconduct and Minor Misconduct before responding.

#### **D. Technology Considerations of E-mail**

- When sending attachments, be aware that they may contain metadata that could disclose unwanted information to the recipient.
- Attachments may contain malicious software code. Use scanning software for both outbound and inbound e-mails.
- If you use e-mail as form of confidential communication, you should know the risks and be familiar with the options of sending secure/encrypted messages.
- There is always a chance that your e-mail may be intercepted. Many of these risks are mitigated if not entirely eradicated when using an encrypted e-mail service.
- Secure client portals are an emerging and safe alternative to e-mail. There are many case and practice management systems that offer a client portal component. You should seriously consider this option as a method of communication for confidential information.

#### **Resources:**

*The Florida Bar v. Mooney*, 49 So. 3d 748 (Fla. 2010). An e-mail exchange between two lawyers escalated when the parties attempted to schedule a deposition. This is only a snippet of how things got out of control:

“Wow, you are delusional!! What kind of drugs are you on??? I can handle anything a little punk like you can dish out ... otherwise, go back to your single wide trailer in the dumps of Pennsylvania and get a life!!”

Additionally, there was an explosive exchange between the lawyers once the deposition was finally scheduled. The Florida Supreme Court made it very clear when amending the oath that

lawyers must be civil not only in court, but also in all written and oral communications, which includes e-mails, letters and depositions.

The Florida Bar and the Supreme Court found that these two lawyers violated Rule 3-4.3 (commission of an act that is contrary to justice) and Rule 4-8.4 (conduct that is prejudicial to the administration of justice). Further, the Court sanctioned the lawyer who filed the complaint and provided the e-mail exchange with a public reprimand, while the other lawyer received a 10-day suspension.

*The Florida Bar v. Norkin*, 38 Fla. L. Weekly S786 SC11-1356 (Fla. Oct. 31, 2013). A lawyer was suspended for two years for multiple instances of disrupting the courtroom by shouting at judges during hearings (two separate judges had to end hearings), disparaging a judge in a motion to recuse, falsely accusing a senior judge of having a "cozy, conspiratorial" relationship with opposing counsel, disparaging opposing counsel in e-mails (copying others), shouting at opposing counsel in the courthouse (that he was dishonest and a scumbag), and disparaging and shouting at Bar counsel in the referee hearing. The Court found violations of Rules 4-3.1, 4-4.4, and 4-8.4(d).

#### **IV. Social Media**

Social media allow interaction among people in which they create and share information and ideas in virtual communities. Social media include but are not limited to blogging, micro-blogging (i.e., Twitter), social networking sites (Facebook, LinkedIn) and interactive multimedia sites (YouTube).



Here are best-practice tips, rules and real-life scenarios:

- The Florida Supreme Court's Civility Pledge added to the Oath of Admission in 2011 requires lawyers to promise fairness, integrity and civility, not only in court, but also in all written and oral communications. This includes e-mails, blogs and social media sites.
- Any communication made by a lawyer must refrain from fraud, deceit, dishonesty and misrepresentation (See Rules 4-7.13, 4-7.14, and 4-8.4(c)). These rules apply to posts on social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn. (For example, do not allow family members to praise your legal services on social media if they have not been a client.)
- Social media sites are not a way to circumvent the lawyer advertising rules. Information appearing on networking sites that are used to promote the lawyer or law firm are subject to the lawyer advertising rules and must comply with all substantive lawyer advertising rules (see Subchapter 4-7).

- Invitations sent directly from a social media site via instant message to a third party to view or link to the lawyer’s page on an unsolicited basis for the purpose of obtaining, or attempting to obtain, legal business are solicitations and violate Rule 4-7.18(a), unless the recipient is the lawyer’s client, former client or relative, has a prior professional relationship with the lawyer or is another lawyer.
- There is no expectation of privacy on the Internet. There is no such thing as a true delete of information. Privacy settings are not a safeguard to protect what you post, and information is stored forever.
- In general, if you would be ashamed to see it on a billboard, do not post it.
- Do not disparage or seek to humiliate the judicial system, judges, opposing counsel, clients or others via social media (Rules 4.82 and 4.8-4(d)).
- Do not post inappropriate or unprofessional pictures.
- If misleading or dishonest information has been posted on your social media profile or account by others, remove the information.
- Visit your social media profile or account on a consistent basis to ensure that you are not running afoul of the rules of the disciplinary system or any of the lawyer advertising rules. If you are unable to actively engage on a social media site, deactivate your account to avoid hackers and inappropriate commentary being placed in your name.
- Responsible participation in social media is time-consuming. Keeping abreast of one social media site may be all that your schedule will allow, as opposed to being involved with many.
- If you do not know much about the social media site, educate yourself before joining.
- Change your password frequently to avoid hackers and spam messages being sent to those with whom you interact.
- Log off after visiting your social media page.
- Delete browsing history, saved passwords and cookies on a regular basis to avoid your social media accounts from being hacked.

Social media can be fun and a way for your practice to reach an entirely new audience. Following these tips will keep you safe and within the rules.

### **Real-life social media situations**

- An assistant state attorney (ASA) in Miami at the conclusion of a trial, while the jury was deliberating, thought it would be entertaining to post a poem on his “personal” Facebook page regarding the trial. The poem was composed to the tune of the television show “Gilligan’s Island.” Within the poem, the ASA referred to opposing counsel as “weasel face” and the defendant as a “gang banger.” In addition, the ASA stated that the judge and the jury were confused and not a single ounce of evidence,

professionalism or integrity existed during the trial. To the ASA's dismay, the poem was leaked and published in a local newspaper. The ASA took the position that the poem was posted on his personal and private Facebook account only for his friends and family to see. Later, the ASA admitted it was a lapse of judgment. The Grievance Committee compelled the ASA to attend an Ethics School and Professionalism Workshop and to issue an apology letter to the judge and opposing counsel.

- A judge declared a mistrial in a murder case after a public defender posted a photo of her male client's leopard print underwear on Facebook. The client was accused of stabbing his girlfriend to death. The client's family brought him a bag of fresh clothes to wear during trial. When correction officers lifted up the pieces for a routine inspection, his public defender snapped a photo of the underwear with a cell phone. While on break, the public defender posted the picture of the underwear on Facebook with caption "proper attire for trial." Although the public defender's Facebook page was private and could be viewed only by friends, someone who saw the posting notified the judge. The public defender was fired from the PD's office.
- *The Florida Bar v. Conway*, 996 So.2d 213 (Fla. 2008). In Conway, the lawyer received a public reprimand for posting derogatory comments about a judge on a blog that included, "Evil Unfair Witch; seemingly mentally ill; ugly condescending attitude, she is clearly unfit for her position and knows not what it means to be a neutral arbiter, and there is nothing honorable about that malcontent." The referee found the statements not only undermined public confidence in the administration of justice but also were prejudicial to the proper administration of justice (Rule 4.8-4(d)).

There is no reasonable expectation of privacy when using the Internet or social media. Be cautious about what you are disseminating on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram and all other social media sites. What may appear as simple humor or a discussion topic could cost you your job or a client, or force you to answer to a Bar grievance.

### **Resources:**

Rules Regulating The Florida Bar

The Oath of Admission to The Florida Bar

## **V. Telephone/Cell Phone**

### **A. Telephone**

Telephone calls frequently serve as an introduction that could lead to a new client or business venture. Telephone conversations also provide an efficient means of negotiating, scheduling and generally informing all parties as a case progresses. It is best practice to:

- Answer a call before the fourth ring.
- Set your phone to divert to voicemail or an alternate line where another person or service will answer after the fourth ring.
- Before answering, determine whether you can devote your full attention to the caller; if not, allow it to go to voicemail and return the call within a reasonable amount of time.
- Ask for clarification – “If I understand you correctly ...”
- Take notes.
- If you need to place the caller on hold, ask first and assure it will not be long (15-30 seconds maximum). If you need longer, ask if you can return the call later.
- Consider whether the conversation is better suited for a face-to-face meeting.
- Place the caller on hold if seeking assistance of a co-worker rather than muffle the phone with your hand.
- If you need to transfer the caller, advise and provide the extension in case the caller is disconnected.



Lawyers should train their support staff to adopt these principles. Telephone calls cannot be recorded without the consent of all parties and generally are not recorded as a business practice. For communications that need to be memorialized, consider either a written communication or a telephone call followed by written confirmation.

## **B. Cell Phone**

Most people use a cell phone on a daily basis and keep it close at all times. Use cell phones with caution, remaining mindful that conversations conducted in public regarding client affairs may inadvertently disclose confidential information to others (Rule 4-1.6). When using a cell phone, it is best practice to:

- Keep your voice low. Unless necessary, do not place or accept phone calls when you are in locations that will make it difficult for you to be heard.
- Ensure your phone is off or silenced when entering court or meetings. Federal courthouses have strict rules regarding cell phones.
- Keep conversations private. If you are expecting an important call or one that deals with confidential matters, remove yourself from the company of others. Be cautious of personal space and keep several feet from others when conducting legal matters.
- Know when to call. Best practice is normal business hours, which are 8 a.m.-5 p.m., unless you are authorized to call at other times. Keep time zones in mind.



- Use a speaker phone only when you are alone. Advise callers when you put them on a speaker phone.

### **C. Hostility via the Telephone/Cell Phone**

Dealing with an angry person over the phone requires a patient and thoughtful response. As lawyers, we pledge to “abstain from all offensive personality.” It is best practice to:

- Keep your composure. Attempting to combat an angry caller will only escalate the situation.
- Listen. Figure out what is causing the hostility and begin to generate ideas on how to resolve the issue.
- Do not interrupt. Let the caller vent. If you cut them off, it will only frustrate them further and make constructive communication more difficult.
- Be empathetic. Does their anger have any validity? Indicate that insults and disrespect are not acceptable, but attempt to understand and address the root of the issue.
- Ask questions. Make sure you truly understand the situation.
- Seek a solution. Indicate you will do your best to resolve the matter.
- Apologize. We all make mistakes; if an apology is appropriate, offer one.
- Get solutions approved. Do not impose a solution; get the caller to agree.
- If all else fails, put the phone down. Politely explain that calmer heads may prevail and indicate that the conversation should be resumed at a later time. It is not ideal, but sometimes it is your best option. Do not feel pressured to resolve the matter; the person could be having a bad day. Know when to end the call and move on.

#### **Resources:**

*How to Deal With Difficult People on the Phone*, By: Peter Murphy

*The Florida Bar v. Wasserman*, 675 So.2d 103 (Fla. 1996). A lawyer who made profane statements to a judicial assistant over the phone was found guilty of indirect criminal contempt and violated Rules 3-4.3 and 4-8.4(a). The lawyer received a six-month suspension.

### **D. Setting Voicemail**

Keep things simple and to the point. It is best practice to:

- Identify your name and organization.
- State that you are unavailable and any other important information.
- Ask the caller to leave a message.

Change your voicemail if you go out of the office. Return calls as promised. Best practice dictates that a person leaving a voicemail should hear from you or your assistant within 24

hours (this advice does not circumvent Rule 4-1.4 Communication). The longer you wait to return calls, the more likely your backlog will get out of hand. After you have written the message down, delete it from your voicemail box. It can be very irritating to a caller to find a voicemail box that is full.



### **E. Leaving a Voicemail**

When leaving a voicemail it is best practice to:

- Speak slowly and leave your number at both the beginning and end of the message.
- Limit your comments to one or two matters. Keep your message short.
- Never leave a message to defend your character, establish your reputation or resolve a feud.
- Make the call's purpose clear, beyond just please return my call.
- Don't leave confidential information on a voicemail; you could have dialed a wrong number (Rule 4-1.6). If you receive a voicemail related to the representation of your client that you reasonably should know was sent inadvertently, you should promptly notify the caller (See Rule 4-4.4(b)).

Here is an example of a professional voicemail:

"Hi, this is Cathy Smith with Dale and Dale Law Firm at 112-555-1245. I am calling to let you know that I received a settlement offer in your case, and I would like to schedule an appointment with you. Please call me at your earliest convenience to schedule an appointment. Again, this is Cathy Smith with Dale and Dale Law Firm, and you can reach me at 112-555-1245. Thank you."

## **VI. Laptop/Tablet Usage in Public**

The ability to take work anywhere with a laptop or tablet comes with potential threats to confidentiality (Rule 4-1.6) and security of client information. It is best practice to:

- Use a VPN. A virtual private security network set up by your company allows you to connect remotely using a secure connection.
- Keep your laptop/tablet secure. A thief can physically steal your laptop, but you can keep your information secure by using a strong access password or passcode.
- Use built-in security features. Your device may already have security features built in. Use these features to keep hackers from accessing data.
- Keep your software updated. Many updates include security patches to correct problems found in outdated versions.
- Turn off sharing. You may have your device set up so others can access documents while you are in the office, but turn off this feature when you are in public.
- Be aware of your surroundings. Not all dangers in the digital world are high-tech. Someone may simply be looking over your shoulder.
- Use a privacy screen to keep people from looking over your shoulder and seeing your data.
- Avoid “free” and “unsecured” Wi-Fi connections. Always use a Wi-Fi service or connection that encrypts your data transmission.



**Resources:**

[www.pcworld.com](http://www.pcworld.com)  
[www.bnlug.org](http://www.bnlug.org)

**VII. Records Management**

A core asset of every law firm and legal organization is information. Lawyers sift through enormous amounts of information daily – everything from client files to printed contracts to the e-mails they receive. Making sense of all this information and ensuring that it is sufficiently protected and accessible is daunting but necessary.



There are several Bar rules dealing with record-keeping. (See “Ethics Informational Packet: Closed Files,” produced by The Florida Bar’s Ethics Department.)

Records information management, often abbreviated "RIM," encompasses the policy, processes and procedures that law office administrators employ to manage such information. RIM is the process of identifying, organizing, maintaining and accessing all of the records created or



received by an organization in its day-to-day operations. These records can be electronic or paper and include virtually everything that passes through an organization's doors. There are many reasons a firm or individual lawyer might employ a particular RIM strategy, but the most important are the most practical: improving productivity, cutting costs and complying with legislative, regulatory, Bar-mandated and internal policy requirements.

For best practices, consult:

- *The Lawyer's Guide to Records Management* (2007). This important book is under re-editing by the ABA but is still available on Amazon.com.
- ARMA International, the association for records managers. It includes SIGs (specific industry groups), including one for law firm and legal department records managers. [www.arma.org](http://www.arma.org). The ARMA online bookstore has several law firm-specific publications addressing the lawyer's needs for guidance in records information management.

## **VIII. Expectations**

Best practice dictates that lawyers must manage expectations in electronic communication. When dealing with a client or opposing counsel, explain to them how your office works, and that if you are not available they are welcome to speak with your staff. Let them know when you generally return calls.

Before you give out your cell phone number, consider whether it is necessary for the contact to have this access. Advise whether it is for emergency purposes only. Let contacts know if you will receive and respond to text messages. If you are leaving the office for an extended period, set an away message for your e-mail and voicemail. If you take a long vacation, file notices of unavailability on all of your cases.

Set limits on access to you via cell phone, e-mail and text. If you do not work on weekends, let people know and set a message on your cell phone and work phone that calls will be returned during the workweek. When expectations are established in the beginning, people will generally respect boundaries.

## **IX. A discussion of Ethics Issues in Electronic Communication**

The increased use of technology makes it imperative that lawyers be well-versed not only in technology but also in the issues that may arise with the use of technology. The Rules Regulating The Florida Bar and various Florida Bar ethics opinions set forth guidelines and limitations of the use of technology.

## **A. Creating Inadvertent Relationships**

Lawyers should not give off-the-cuff advice via social networking sites or other electronic communication, particularly specific advice in response to online questions, to avoid inadvertently creating a lawyer-client relationship. Ethics rules do not create lawyer-client relationships; instead, they guide the lawyer's conduct once the relationship has been established. Whether a lawyer-client relationship has been established is a legal and factual matter based on the reasonable, subjective belief of the person seeking legal advice or services, not the lawyer's intent or belief.

## **B. Electronic Practice**

Lawyers may provide legal services over the Internet, as long as the services do not require in-person consultation with the client or court appearances (Florida Ethics Opinion 00-4). All of the Rules of Professional Conduct apply to representation over the Internet, including diligence, competence, communication, confidentiality, conflicts of interest, etc. (*Id.*). Florida Ethics Opinion 00-4 was written before adoption of Rule 4-1.2(c), which permits limited representation as long as the limitation is reasonable under the circumstances and is not prohibited by law or rule, and the client gives informed consent in writing. Rule 4-1.2(c) applies if the Internet representation is a limited form of representation.

## **C. Confidentiality**

Many lawyers treat confidentiality as synonymous with privilege, but the two are distinct, and confidentiality is much broader. A lawyer may not disclose any information relating to a client's representation, regardless of the source, without the client's informed consent (with limited exceptions) (Rule 4-1.6). For resources on how to keep information secure, see the Records Management section.

Many confidentiality issues relate to electronic communications. For example:

- Lawyers who use cloud computing must take appropriate care to ensure confidentiality of client information (Florida Ethics Opinion 12-3).
- Lawyers who use electronic devices such as printers, copiers and scanners should be aware that those devices can store data, and take appropriate steps to secure client information (Florida Ethics Opinion 10-2).
- A lawyer who uses electronic forms of communication should take care not to inadvertently provide confidential client information via metadata (see section on metadata below) (Florida Ethics Opinion 06-2).
- When a lawyer outsources paralegal services, communication often occurs via electronic means. The lawyer should take appropriate steps to ensure confidentiality of client

information, including investigating any non-lawyer services to be used and appropriately supervising the non-lawyers involved (Florida Ethics Opinion 07-2). Consider a secure client portal when using outside services.

There have been disciplinary cases in other states involving violation of the confidentiality rule via electronic communication:

*Illinois Disciplinary Board v. Peshek*, No. M.R. 23794 (Ill. May 18, 2010). An assistant public defender was suspended for 60 days for blogging about her clients' cases, including providing confidential information, some of which was detrimental to her clients and some of which indicated that the lawyer may have knowingly failed to prevent a client from making misrepresentation to the court. Reciprocal discipline of 60-day suspension by Wisconsin in *In re Peshek*, 798 N.W.2d 879 (2011).

*In Re Quillinan*, 20 DB Rptr. 288 (2006). The Oregon disciplinary board approved a stipulation for a 90-day suspension of a lawyer who sent an e-mail disclosing to members of the Oregon State Bar's workers' compensation listserv personal and medical information about a client whom she named, indicating the client wanted a new lawyer.

*In re Skinner*, 740 S.E.2d 171 (Ga. 2013). The Supreme Court of Georgia rejected a petition for voluntary discipline seeking a public reprimand for a lawyer's violation of the confidentiality rule by disclosing confidential client information on the Internet in response to the client's negative reviews of the lawyer, citing lack of information about the violation in the record. Presumably the court felt the public reprimand too lenient as it cited to the 60-day suspension in *Peshek* and 90-day suspension in *Quillinan* above.

#### **D. Inadvertent Disclosure via Metadata**

Metadata is information about a particular document or data set that describes how, when and by whom it was created, modified and formatted. It helps users revise, organize and access electronically created files. Lawyers who send documents electronically (outside the discovery context) should take appropriate steps to prevent the disclosure of confidential client information via metadata (Florida Ethics Opinion 06-2). Lawyers should not "mine" the metadata of documents sent to them electronically (*Id.*). Lawyers who receive information inadvertently via metadata (e.g., tracked changes and comments) that were clearly not intended for them must notify the sender of the receipt of the information (*Id.*). After the adoption of Florida Ethics Opinion 06-2, Rule 4-4.4(b) was adopted, which states:

(b) A lawyer who receives a document relating to the representation of the lawyer's client and knows or reasonably should know that the document was inadvertently sent shall promptly notify the sender.

The comment provides further guidance:

Subdivision (b) recognizes that lawyers sometimes receive documents that were mistakenly sent or produced by opposing parties or their lawyers. If a lawyer knows or reasonably should know that such a document was sent inadvertently, then this rule requires the lawyer to promptly notify the sender in order to permit that person to take protective measures. Whether the lawyer is required to take additional steps, such as returning the original document, is a matter of law beyond the scope of these rules, as is the question of whether the privileged status of a document has been waived. Similarly, this rule does not address the legal duties of a lawyer who receives a document that the lawyer knows or reasonably should know may have been wrongfully obtained by the sending person. For purposes of this rule, "document" includes e-mail or other electronic modes of transmission subject to being read or put into readable form.

Some lawyers may choose to return a document unread, for example, when the lawyer learns before receiving the document that it was inadvertently sent to the wrong address. Where a lawyer is not required by applicable law to do so, the decision to voluntarily return such a document is a matter of professional judgment ordinarily reserved to the lawyer. See Rules 4-1.2 and 4-1.4.

Microsoft Word documents can contain the following types of hidden data and personal information:

- Comments, revision marks from tracked changes, versions and ink annotations.
- Document properties and personal information.
- Headers, footers and watermarks.
- Hidden text.
- Document server properties.
- Custom XML data.

In Microsoft Word, the Document Inspector can be used to find and remove hidden data and personal information in Word documents. Refer to the help function to search for instructions specific to a particular version of Word.

### **E. Impugning Integrity of Judges**

Electronic communications create the possibility that lawyers may impugn the integrity of a judge, which is prohibited under the rules. Social media and blogging in particular create a situation in which lawyers may post information without thinking about the potential consequences (Rule 4-8.2 and *The Florida Bar v. Conway*, Case No. SC08-326 (2008)).

## **F. Communication with/Investigating Witnesses**

A lawyer generally may view the public social networking pages of a witness. A lawyer generally may subpoena the social networking page of a witness (See New York City Ethics Opinion 2010-2). A lawyer may or may not be able to “friend” an unrepresented witness using the lawyer’s own name and profile. Although at least one state has taken the position that a lawyer may do so, The Florida Bar Professional Ethics Committee has not addressed the issue and may take the position that any friend request would have to clearly indicate that a lawyer is making the request in a representational capacity (New York City Ethics Opinion 2010-2).

Rule 4-4.3 prohibits a lawyer from “stating or implying the lawyer is disinterested.” A lawyer also “may not engage in conduct involving fraud, dishonesty, deceit or misrepresentation” under Rule 4-8.4(c), nor violate the rules of conduct through an agent under 4-8.4(a). Thus, a lawyer may not create a false social networking profile to “friend” an unrepresented witness to obtain information, or use an investigator to create a false profile to make a “friend” request (New York City Ethics Opinion 2010-2). A lawyer also may not use an investigator or other third person to “friend” an unrepresented witness to obtain possible impeachment material, because use of the third party is deceptive (See Philadelphia Ethics Opinion 2009-02).

## **G. Communicating with Represented Persons via Social Networking Sites**

A lawyer may access the public pages of an opposing party’s social networking site (See New York State Bar Ethics Opinion 843 (2010)). A lawyer may subpoena an opposing party’s social networking site pages, including private portions of the profile (See *Romano v. Steelcase, Inc.*, 907 N.Y.S.2d (N.Y. Sup. 2010)). A lawyer may not make a “friend” request to high-ranking employees of a represented corporation that is the defendant in a lawyer’s case who have supervisory authority, whose statements can be imputed to the corporation, or who can bind the corporation. They are considered represented for purposes of the ex parte rule (See, San Diego Ethics Opinion 2011-2; Rule 4-4.2, 4-8.4(c)). A lawyer would not be able to use an investigator to do so either (Rule 4-4.2, 4-8.4(c) and 4-8.4(a)).

## **H. Social Networking and Judges**

Judges should be careful regarding social networking. In Florida, judges may not “friend” lawyers who appear before them, or permit lawyers who appear before them to list the judge as a “friend” (Florida Judicial Ethics Advisory Opinion 2009-20). Florida Bar members should not make a “friend” request to a judge, to avoid assisting a judge in violating the Code of Judicial Conduct.

Judges also should avoid the potential for ex parte communications – at least one judge has received a public reprimand for ex parte communications on Facebook with a lawyer for a party in a pending matter before him (See North Carolina Judicial Standards Commission 08-234).

Judges should be careful regarding their campaign activities relating to social media. In Florida, judges' election committees may have social networking sites that comply with campaign requirements and may allow lawyers to list themselves as "fans" as long as the committees/judges do not control who may list themselves as fans (See Florida Judicial Ethics Advisory Opinion 2009-20).

### **I. Social Networking and Mediators**

In Florida, a mediator may "friend" lawyers and parties appearing before the mediator on the mediator's social networking page and may become a "friend" on the pages of parties or lawyers appearing before the mediator. However, doing so may limit a mediator's ability to handle future mediations, as "friending" may create an appearance that the party or lawyer can influence the mediator, and the mediator would therefore lack the required impartiality (See Florida Mediator Ethics Advisory Opinion 2010-001).

### **J. Social Networking and Jurors**

Lawyers may view public portions of prospective jurors' networking sites. However, lawyers may not "friend," contact, communicate or subscribe to Twitter accounts of jurors. Lawyers also may not make any misrepresentation or engage in any deceit in viewing jurors' social networking sites (See New York County Ethics Opinion 743 (2011); New York City Formal Opinion 2012-2). Lawyers must bring juror misconduct to the court's attention following rules on court and juror contact (*Id.*; see also Rule Regulating The Florida Bar 4-3.5). Lawyers also should be mindful of any rules of civil or criminal procedure that address juror contact (e.g., Fla. R. Civ. Pro. 1.431(h), Fla. R. Crim. Pro. 3.575, which prohibit a lawyer from communicating with a juror after trial unless the lawyer has legal grounds, has filed a motion and has obtained an order permitting the contact).

Juror misconduct during trials relating to social media includes: researching information on the Internet, posting real time information about ongoing trials, "friending" a defendant in an ongoing trial and polling friends to determine the juror's verdict (e.g., "Social Media, Jury Duty a Bad Mix," *Miami Herald*, May 5, 2012).

#### **Resources:**

##### **The Florida Bar**

850-561-5600

800-342-8060

[www.FLORIDABAR.org](http://www.FLORIDABAR.org)

**The Henry Latimer Center for Professionalism**

850-561-5747

[www.flabar.org/professionalism](http://www.flabar.org/professionalism)

**The Florida Bar Ethics and Advertising Department**

850-561-5780

Ethics Hotline (for Florida Bar Members Only)

800-235-8619

[www.FLORIDABAR.org/ethics](http://www.FLORIDABAR.org/ethics)

**FLA, Inc. (Florida Lawyers Assistance – Substance Abuse Help)**

800-282-8981

[www.fla-lap.org](http://www.fla-lap.org)

**The Florida Bar’s Practice Resource Institute**

850-561-5616

[www.FLORIDABAR.org/pri](http://www.FLORIDABAR.org/pri)

**The Florida Bar Attorney Client Assistance Program (ACAP)**

850-561-5673

866-352-0707

[www.FLORIDABAR.org/ACAP](http://www.FLORIDABAR.org/ACAP)

**The Florida Bar Unlicensed Practice of Law**

850-561-5840

[www.FLORIDABAR.org](http://www.FLORIDABAR.org)

**Florida Board of Bar Examiners**

850-487-1292

[www.floridabarexam.org](http://www.floridabarexam.org)

## Updates

**Aug. 7, 2015:** Updates requirements of Rule 4-7.18(b) under Section II “Texting.”