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Are social and professional networking mutually exclusive?

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Last week I attended the LegalTech conference in New York City. LegalTech New York is sponsored by Incisive Media and focuses on distributing information about technology and law practice management.

While at the event, I attended a number of seminars regarding Web 2.0 and its application and uses in legal practice—specifically in law firms. A prevailing theme that emerged from many panelists is that online social networking and online professional networking are two very different beasts.

In fact, one of the panelists carried two Blackberrys with him wherever he went — one for his professional network and the other for his social network. His explanation for his dual Blackberry methodology is that it helps him keep the two networks separate.

I wonder whether his attempts to keep the two separate is futile, at best, and pointless, at worst. And, even to the extent that online networking can be confined to the professional sphere, doing so is short sighted.

Networking can be loosely defined as “an extended group of people with similar interests or concerns who interact and remain in informal contact for mutual assistance or support.”

The online arena is a perfect place to network and for that very reason online networking has become mainstream. Facebook now has more than million 36 million members, Linked In has 8 millions users and Twitter has more than 3 million and is increasing exponentially in popularity.

The number of online legal networks is increasing as well. Many new forums and networking sites devoted to the legal field have been launched in the last year, including include Lawlink (lawlink.com), Martindale-Hubbell's Connected (martindale.com/connected) and the American Bar Association's legal network, Legally Minded (legallyminded.com).

While it is encouraging to see established legal organizations attempt to participate in the Web 2.0 world, such forums are not, in

my opinion, nearly as useful as the mainstream networking sites.

Certainly useful information can be gleaned from the sites; however, busy lawyers have only a limited amount of time to devote to networking, and their time would be better spent at mainstream online networking sites.

Furthermore, attempting to limit online participation to networks devoted to the legal field is counterintuitive, as is attempting to separate so-called social networking from professional networking.

Social and professional networking necessarily overlap. A person's interests are not limited to their profession unless, of course, the person is an unbelievably one dimensional and boring human being. People are more than their careers.

Separating one's professional and social online identities and interactions is a mistake. It is the overlap between the two that makes a lawyer more likeable, more approachable and more human.

People would rather hire a lawyer who is person to whom they can relate — someone with whom they can connect — and understand. If you limit your social networking to a circle of people you already know, you miss out on the chance to interact with potential clients on a more personal level.

Successful networking, therefore, doesn't occur in such a delineated fashion and lawyers who believe that they can or should control and separate their online networks in such a way are missing the point. In the process, they're also missing out on opportunities to connect with others, including potential referrers and clients.

The social and professional arenas are not mutually exclusive. They can and should overlap since it is the overlap that makes all the difference.

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