

the virtual office...

Wyoming Style

one lawyer's approach

I recently underwent a big career change—the second in my time as a lawyer.

After 14 years in a partnership, I decided to go out on my own and start a new practice here in Buffalo. After some anxious days and nights, the move ultimately took all of about five days, and we were up and running. The first time the change was foisted upon me was when the electorate decided I was no longer their collective cup of tea and my nearly decade-long service in the prosecutor's office would not be needed. That one took a little different path for me personally. After about three months of sitting at home in the kitchen, teaching myself how to play guitar from YouTube videos, my wife made the decision that it was time for me to get up and get going again.

Wife: "Are you depressed?"

Me: "I don't think so."

Wife: "Then why are you sitting in your underwear with that guitar?"

Me: "How else am I going to learn how to play?"

Both of these experiences helped me realize that I wanted to practice law in a different way and I wanted to be happy while doing it. I no longer wanted to just practice the way it has always been done. I did not want to wear a pressed white shirt and tie to my 10-hour day at the office, grind my teeth all day, shut the lights off at 6 p.m. and go home to forget about it. The clear demarcation between my work at the office or in court and personal life at home didn't make sense to me anymore.

Many of my age mates are now in need of legal services. More and more as I get older, my peers are taking up leadership positions in the community, business and government. We are, as a group, immigrants to technology. I didn't get e-mail until my sophomore year of undergrad, and my first cell phone wasn't for another five years after that. While I have certainly been "online" my entire legal career, in the beginning, I vehemently resisted being connected outside the office. Today I have reversed course entirely; by staying connected and available to clients, I have freed myself of the confines of the office while reacting to clients' needs

faster. I am nowhere near the cutting edge, but simply having e-mail, text, calendar and access to files anywhere I am has given me disconnection through connection; more court appearances from the trail, lake or atop a mountain equal a happier practitioner. Most clients don't care if you are sitting in a large, leather chair in front of a wall of legal tomes, but rather that you are invested in the success of their particular case.

When I started my own practice, I knew I wanted to handle diverse cases. I have always admired and wanted to emulate the true general practitioners. I wanted to be able to tell clients, "Yep, I can handle that," with confidence no matter what they brought in. While I want to live in this beautiful, small town, I didn't necessarily want a small practice.

In order to accomplish this, I have turned time and again to the expertise of my fellow lawyers. While my clients may like me, they do not like me well enough to pay for the time it would take me to gain expertise in every issue they may bring in. Collaborating with other lawyers has broadened my legal horizons. These collaborations



by Chris Wages

are more than just one-line emails or a quick issue on a listserve, but often become lasting relationships.

Partnering up on cases may put more minds at work but also has the added bonus of camaraderie. Lawyers are often some of my favorite people, and out of these legal collaborations have come lasting family friendships. Sometimes giving over half a case can yield twice the results. Recently I sat with my friend, John, through an eight-day slugfest of a jury trial. The ability to cooperate, commiserate and just sometimes tell quiet jokes, and then try to keep from laughing, changed a slog to something we will have shared stories about for years. Even my kids have been doing one liners we brought home from trial each night.

People often speak of life-hacks as shortcuts or ways to carve additional time into their busy lives. I've come to think of a life-hack in a different way – one of balance and stability in a life that can easily become too focused on one aspect.

As an avid cyclist, I think of a wheel as a metaphor for life. Keep all the spokes tight and straight, and the rim stays true; let

a spoke go too loose or over-tighten one and the wheel quickly goes out of balance. The practice of law does not have to define who I am, but what I do, and hopefully what I do well. Each spoke in the wheel needs equal attention. By thinking through this metaphor, I feel as if finding time to spend on music or with family or friends is not “sneaking away” from the office, but as valid and important a use of my time as any. The spokes of my life wheel might not all be perfectly balanced every day of the week, but in a general sense and with a look from afar, I hope to find this circular stability. Most importantly, thinking of this metaphor helps me realize it's this one life we've got; we might as well have fun with it. Collaborating with friends, making time for life outside of the office, and being creative with technology – all of these life-hacks aren't really *tricks* in the traditional sense but become proverbial truths that allow a balance in life.

I don't really think of myself as an innovative lawyer; I think of myself as someone for whom the practice of law is a serious vocation, but for whom avocation is equally important. That innovation ultimately has

less to do with whatever modern gizmo is trending, and purportedly guaranteed to double the efficiency of my practice, and more to do with a style and flair of practice that helps me break free of a more traditional way of working in the law. I give my all to each client who walks through my door – that “all” might just be happening on the steps of Yellowstone Lodge.[♫]

Chris Wages...

graduated from University of Wyoming Law School, and began his career as a prosecutor in Sweetwater County. In 2001, he moved to Buffalo and went into private practice, in addition to serving as the Buffalo Municipal Court Judge.

Wages was elected as the Johnson County Attorney in 2003 and served the citizens of Johnson County for two terms.

