

## A lesson from the trades



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According to Merriam-Webster, an “apprentice” is someone “who is learning by practical experience under skilled workers a trade, art or calling.” Wikipedia describes an apprenticeship as “a system of training a new generation of practitioners of a trade or profession with on-the-job training and often some accompanying study.”

Apprenticeships, historically used in trades and guilds (such as carpentry, plumbing, baking, or tailoring), provided the apprentice invaluable practical training and experience for several years and allowed him/her to make a modest living for a defined period of time. In turn, the employer had the responsibility of providing meaningful guidance and instruction, with the benefit of additional, less expensive, resources to perform the work needed in the employer’s business. Through this apprenticeship model, the employer also filled a gatekeeping role for the trade, protecting the public from inexperience and potentially deficient services by the neophytes in the trade.

When I reflect on my legal training, I recall my first job in a law firm. I had just graduated from college and my next step was uncertain. I was living in an unfamiliar small town in Iowa where my parents had moved. I knew nobody, and certainly, nobody had any reason to help me in my quest to become an attorney.

Enter George Lind. George, a former Big Law attorney who had left that practice in Florida years earlier to be a solo practitioner in small-town Iowa, was looking for a legal secretary. His demanding, and sometimes intimidating, nature had yielded him a history of 57 different legal secretaries in his 30-plus years of practice. Although a venerable member of the local bar, he was not for the weak of heart.

I became Legal Secretary #58. George knew that my time working for him in his solo practice could be limited by my goal of going to law school the next year. With this knowledge, he could have viewed me as merely a stop-gap, temporary employee whose purpose was simply to get daily clerical tasks done. But instead, this senior attorney turned his needs into a teaching opportunity, making this working experience the first step in my legal education.

He purposefully exposed me to many types of legal issues, identified and taught me about ethical considerations in different situations, involved me in the business operations of the firm, and demonstrated the demands, obligations, and burdens of the profession. He had me prepare hundreds of pleadings and letter communications; he sent me to the courthouse to watch trials during the work day; he gave me evening “homework assignments” reviewing abstracts of title and explaining my analysis to him; he took me to in-home client visits and office conferences to observe how difficult conversations are handled; he modeled commitment to community and pro bono service; and he showed me how to keep detailed billing records, invoice clients, and handle trust accounts. In sum, he provided a comprehensive view of what private practice looked like. In turn, his trainee worked many long hours, was fully invested in the clients being served, took responsibility and pride in monitoring expenses and

collecting revenue, and became further committed to serving in the profession.

Admittedly, I later learned black-letter law and how to issue-spot in law school. I developed legal research and writing skills as a summer associate for two large law firms. And those technical research and writing skills were enhanced and refined as a big firm associate. Certainly each of these steps was important to my professional development.

But 25 years later, I recognize that my 15-month experience with George Lind, regardless of the job title, was my apprenticeship. It encompassed real-time, hands-on technical, business, and practice training. And yet, there was something more. Beyond an employer-employee relationship, there was a dynamic combination of the teacher’s “pass-the-torch” mentality and the apprentice’s reciprocal desire to learn the craft and honor the teacher.

What that experience showed me was that—not only semantically, but substantively and even psychologically—the role that an employer plays with an apprentice is inherently different from the role that an employer plays with an employee or an associate. And in turn, the expectations and the sacrifices the apprentice is willing to bear for the qualitative difference in experience matters.

I have the pleasure of addressing the newest group of bar admittees this month: fresh-faced apprentices yearning to learn and launch their careers. I urge our active practitioners across the state to consider an apprenticeship mindset to integrate this group of attorneys into the practice and the bar. The preservation of the profession calls for it. ▲



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