

SELF-AUDIT CHECKLIST¹

This checklist is a tool for the small law office to help identify strengths and weaknesses of office management practices. It is designed for both lawyers and non-lawyer staff to complete, although non-lawyer staff may only be able to complete portions of the audit. Those completing any portion of the audit should be candid, so responses may vary between the lawyers and the non-lawyers. Use the results to foster a better mutual understanding of what goes on within the office. This knowledge will enable you take the requisite action to ensure that the office is managed properly.

Name of firm:

Members of firm:

Areas of practice:

The areas addressed are: Client Relations, Confidentiality, Conflicts of Interest, Docket/Calendaring, Records Management, Staff Management, Financial Management (Timekeeping-Billing-Budgeting-Financial Record-keeping and Reporting), Professional Practice, and Technology.

Please take a few moments to review all of the questions and make note of any areas that you would like to discuss more thoroughly. The last page allows space for your notes and clarifications. "YES" means all or most of the time; "NO" means never or rarely. We recommend that all employees in the office also complete this checklist.

¹ This Self-Audit Checklist was provided to the Colorado Supreme Court Office of Attorney Regulation Counsel by the Washington State Bar Association Law Office Management Program. The Washington State Bar had compiled such checklist from a much more extensive and very useful book entitled, Easy Self-Audits for The Busy Law Office, written by Nancy Byerly Jones who is an attorney and certified mediator (superior court and family in North Carolina); a national consultant and coach for lawyers and legal staff, and author of a monthly column for Lawyers Weekly USA. The book is published by the ABA Law Management Section. For more information on Easy Self-Audits for the Busy Law Office, please visit www.ababooks.org. For more information about the author, please visit www.nbjconsulting.com.

I. CLIENT RELATIONS

The relationship with the client is a critical consideration for law office management. Everything that happens in a law firm has a direct or indirect effect on the client. The way a law firm conducts its business will also influence its relationship with its clients.

Law firms are often set up so that the critical element of administrative support is service to the attorney. The attorney, in turn, serves the client. Today, a client-centered law firm involves all personnel directly serving the client. The attorney is a team member involved in providing overall service to the client.

Examine your client relation efforts by asking the following questions:

	Yes	No	N/A
Do we return clients' phone calls and email within 24-48 hours?			
Do we perform all the work we told the client we would?			
Do we send follow-up letters after a meeting or telephone conversation in which new decisions have been reached?			
Do we complete the work in a timely fashion?			
Do we follow up with clients at least every six weeks even when their cases are inactive?			
Do we acknowledge staff members for good client relations?			
Do we ask the client for feedback as the matter moves along?			
Do we use engagement letters to describe our office practices?			
Do we use fee agreements and fee statements to clearly explain what clients will be charged and when fees will be earned?			
Do we use email with client permission?			

	Yes	No	N/A
Is our e-mail marked "Confidential Privileged Communication?"			
Do we have a policy regarding texting with clients?			

II. CONFIDENTIALITY

Clients depend on their lawyer to safeguard the information they provide. The Rules of Professional Conduct provide for only limited situations where this trust may be broken. Since trust is very difficult to reestablish once it has been broken, it is important that you take steps to ensure that every member of the firm does all they can to safeguard client information.

	Yes	No	N/A
Do all new employees sign a confidentiality form acknowledging they have discussed confidentiality with you, read the relevant Rules of Professional Conduct, and will not breach the confidentiality of any client during and after their association with the firm?			
Do we make sure no client files or other confidential materials are ever left in the reception area or other public access areas?			
While conferring in person with clients, do we avoid taking calls or otherwise talking with other clients so as to protect client identities?			
Are the fax machines and copiers located away from where non-firm persons may be able to see confidential materials?			
If we are in an office-sharing arrangement, have we discussed confidentiality with the landlord, other tenants and any employees who may be privy to confidential information (e.g., receptionist, word processor, etc.)?			
Is the office locked every night to discourage theft?			
Do we need a password to access data?			

Do we have confidentiality agreements for cleaning services, contract staff and computer maintenance vendors who have access to our computer systems?			
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III. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Many law firms rely on the staffs' collective memories to do their conflict of interest checks. This method rarely works accurately over any period of time. Every case handled cannot be so memorable that you will never forget every person involved. You should maintain a written conflict of interest system and keep it up to date. All staff members should be trained to use the system and conflict checks should be done prior to the discussion of any new matter with a client or potential client.

Examine the effectiveness of your conflict of interest system by answering the following questions:

	Yes	No	N/A
Do we maintain and continuously update a master client list of current clients, former clients, parties, employees and other individuals with cross references to files to facilitate researching apparent conflicts of interest?			
Do we get a signed waiver from the client if representation is requested after a potential conflict has been discussed?			
Do we request information regarding other names (i.e., maiden, marital, etc.) that potential clients and adverse parties may have used in the past?			
Do we properly identify and record information regarding the adverse party?			
Do we check our master list for conflicts of interest before accepting a new client or matter?			
If we do not accept a potential client's case, do we notify the client in writing?			

IV. DOCKETING and CALENDARING

Missing a filing deadline or court appearance can be extremely damaging to a client as well as causing embarrassment and a potential malpractice claim for you. Each firm member should maintain an individual calendar in addition to a master calendar for the entire firm. Answer the following questions to determine how well you are doing in this area:

	Yes	No	N/A
Do we keep individual calendars, i.e., attorney and secretary/paralegal?			
Does your calendar include (as applicable):			
a) statutes of limitations?			
b) all court appearances?			
c) client and other appointments?			
e) real estate closing dates?			
f) all self-imposed, discretionary deadlines (i.e., promises made to others, promises made to you and work deadlines you have set for yourself?)			
Do we maintain a master calendar?			
Do we have a good system for updating and maintaining each calendar in case of scheduling changes?			
Do we use reminder slips (tickler slips) to draw the attorney's attention to an upcoming deadline?			
If the calendar is maintained on the computer, do we frequently print out a copy to use in case of power failures or other computer problems?			
Do we use a networked (if applicable) calendar program?			

V. RECORDS MANAGEMENT

The client file represents a record of the work you have performed for the client. It also represents one of the most frequently overlooked tasks in the

office. Maintaining the files in an orderly manner that allows for efficient access to client information will save time and money in the long run. In addition, the ability to promptly respond to inquiries by having the information at your fingertips will enhance your professional image. "Clerical" does not mean "unimportant"--especially in a law office.

The following questions should help you determine the current status of your records management program:

	Yes	No	N/A
Do we have a standardized filing system for all client files?			
Are all materials filed timely and regularly?			
Do we follow a file retention schedule after a case is completed, i.e., when to close, when to review for destruction, what to return to client, what to keep and for how long?			
Do we keep back-up media of electronic records off-site?			
Does each file have a log or diary of all the events of the matter including commitments to you and your commitments to others?			
Do we back up our data at least weekly?			
Do we attempt periodic "restores" of data (to check if it works)?			
Do we use computer virus filters and a firewall?			
Is there an office policy regarding email retention? Are emails saved to the relevant client file? Is there a policy dictating who is responsible for saving emails?			
Does the firm utilize a cloud system for file storage? Is the security of this system monitored periodically?			
In case of a breach of electronically stored information, does the firm have a procedure for informing clients?			

VI. STAFF MANAGEMENT

A large part of a client's impression of your law firm will come from the actions of your staff. It is critical to your success that your staff is well trained and motivated to provide excellent service to the firm's clients. Working in a law office is much more than just a job. A client's welfare is placed directly at stake by your choices.

Check your policies and procedures against the following list of questions:

	Yes	No	N/A
Do we have a current office policy and procedures manual and do we follow it?			
Do we sufficiently train our employees when first hired as well as when major procedural changes occur, e.g., automation?			
Do we train employees in the ethical requirements of working in a law office?			
Do we ask all employees to read the Rules of Professional Conduct?			
Do we offer our staff any continuing education opportunities?			
Do we keep staff members informed and give them an opportunity to offer input regarding matters affecting them?			
Do we properly supervise employees by reviewing their work?			
Do we set a good example for our staff by creating, implementing, and monitoring dependable office policies and systems, (i.e., docket/work control, conflicts of interests, good documentation, etc.)?			
Do we express appreciation to employees for work well done and make sure any necessary criticism is shared privately, and in a timely and constructive manner?			

Do we clearly communicate expectations of performance to all firm employees?			
Do we encourage and motivate employees to take pride and ownership in their work?			
Do we provide support and assistance for staff members in the handling of disrespectful, rude and otherwise out-of-line clients and others?			
Do we keep our staff informed as to our whereabouts and schedule?			
Do we provide a "safe" office environment? This question refers to both the physical space as well as the office culture that allows for the questioning of the work by anyone before it leaves the office.			
Are attorneys and staff aware of the consequences of hitting "reply all" in responding to emails?			
Is there a firm policy as to whether clients can be copied on communications with opposing counsel? Is there a firm policy asking opposing counsel not to copy his or her clients on emails to the firm?			

VII. FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

Timekeeping, billing, budgeting and financial record keeping and reporting are included under the financial management umbrella. All of these activities should be coordinated to produce an efficient accounting and record-keeping system. Mastering the elements of financial management should give you a sense of control over the direction your firm.

Timekeeping:

	Yes	No	N/A
Do we have documented timekeeping procedures?			
Do we train all timekeepers in proper timekeeping?			
Is time recorded at the time the work is performed?			

Billing:

	Yes	No	N/A
Are all expense disbursements posted to clients' files on a regular basis?			
	Yes	No	N/A
Are all internally incurred expenses (postage, long distance, etc.) posted to clients' files regularly?			
Are all payments and credits posted to clients' files regularly?			
Are all entries reviewed for accuracy?			
Are all bills reviewed and approved?			
Are bills sent out on a regularly scheduled basis?			
Are the accounts receivable evaluated and followed up on regularly?			
Are client trust funds kept in a COLTAF or other bank trust account, separate from operating funds in the operating account?			

Budgeting:

	Yes	No	N/A
Do we have a budget?			
Do we compare actual results to the budget on a regular basis?			

Financial Recordkeeping and Reporting:

	Yes	No	N/A
Do we prepare tax returns timely?			

	Yes	No	N/A
Do we have cash handling, and accounting checks and balances in place, i.e., division of responsibilities?			

Do we generate monthly or other regularly-scheduled financial reports?			
Do we share the firm's state of well-being with everyone in the firm?			

VIII. PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE (STAFF RESPONSES NOT NECESSARY)

These questions relate to several of the details of how the lawyers handle daily events on client matters. Your standards of care should be consistent and timely--that can be difficult with many interruptions.

	Yes	No	N/A
Do I refrain from giving legal advice over the phone if I am not familiar with the client?			
Do I have a designated back-up attorney for my files?			
Do I regularly go to CLEs in my specialty?			
Do I discuss the recommended course of action with clients at a time and place conducive to a good exchange of information and questions?			
Do I document the client's choice of action and so inform the client in writing?			
Do I have a system to follow up on assignments given to others in the office?			
Do I have a system for notifying clients of the results of motions on their cases and so document the file?			
Is the firm website checked periodically for accuracy? (Have attorneys or staff left the firm? Are current attorney profiles and contact information accurate?)			
Are emails regarding representation that are sent through the firm website responded to in a timely fashion?			

IX. TECHNOLOGY

Office technology is nothing more than the tools to best serve your clients. The challenge is to have the knowledge to use these tools fully. Indeed, it may soon be that a lawyer's professional competence will include the use of technology to benefit clients.

	Yes	No	N/A
Do all our lawyers and staff use computers?			
Is everyone trained to usefully use our software?			
Do we use case management software?			
Do we train new employees about our computer system?			
Do we periodically review these systems?			

X. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

For additional information on Law Office Practice Management, you may contact Reba J. Nance, Director of the Colorado Bar Association Law Office Practice Management and Risk Management @ reban@cobar.org.

The Colorado Lawyer has a monthly column devoted to Technology and Law Practice that can be also used as a resource of information. See also, www.cobar.org. "Practice Resources" for information on law office practice management and technology issues.

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