

Online COACHING CENTRE



Elizabeth Hyde

users discover benefits of online learning

Lawyers are discovering that there's more to the practicePRO online COACHING CENTRE than meets the eye: The \$50 CLE credit that they receive when they complete three OCC modules (and which is applied to their future insurance premium) is only the beginning. Miller Thomson, LLP, for example, discovered that mandatory use of the OCC accelerated the technology learning curve for its lawyers. Sole practitioner Suzanne Dajczak used the OCC to restructure her law practice. Others are discovering that this online CLE facility accommodates their busy schedules, saves on travel time and hours spent in classrooms, and is an excellent resource for developing soft skills.

Miller Thomson LLP, an international business law firm with more than 350 lawyers in eight offices, is a strong supporter of continuing education. In 2001, its executive committee endorsed a requirement that all lawyers meet a minimum CLE expectation of

20 hours per year. In the Ontario offices, the online COACHING CENTRE became a mandatory component of that commitment. All of Miller Thomson's approximately 200 Ontario lawyers are required to complete three OCC modules each year. The CLE

time is docketed under special codes. If they do not complete the program, and cannot provide a reasonable explanation, they are docked \$50.

According to Elizabeth Hyde, national Director, Professional Development at Miller Thomson, the firm made the OCC mandatory for several reasons: to introduce lawyers in the firm to the concept of online CLE; to raise awareness of available resources; and to take advantage of the LawPRO CLE credit. "The firm believes that each lawyer must make a commitment to the firm, to each other and to themselves to pursue excellence in professional and practice development," says Hyde.

The wave of the future

From the beginning, the mandatory OCC program has received strong support from management, facilitating the planning and implementation of the program. Hyde says the feedback from firm lawyers is very positive.

"Lawyers recognize both the value of the content in the Coaching Centre, as well as the value that Miller Thomson places on professional development. Getting people used to online CLE has been both the biggest challenge and the biggest success," she says.

Hyde found that lawyers who were not technically inclined experienced difficulty at the beginning of the process, but as they became familiar with the online workshops, their skills improved and they became comfortable with using the Internet. "The OCC has helped our lawyers become familiar with online learning. It really is the wave of the future."

The mandatory OCC program began in 2001 with Miller Thomson's Toronto and Markham offices. It expanded to the Waterloo Region office in 2002 and the Guelph office in 2003. A memo from the Ontario Management Committee initiated the process; it outlined the goals of the program and described the process. The original memo was followed by reminder emails and in-office visits. Hyde suggests that others also consider providing hands-on basic training and detailed program information for users unfamiliar with the technology.

Windsor practitioner, Suzanne Dajczak, found the online COACHING CENTRE to be a useful resource when she restructured her practice in 2003. Having decided that she would no longer practise real estate law, Dajczak was exploring ways to inject more cash flow into the practice to make up for the potential decrease in revenue. Specifically, she was looking for marketing information, networking ideas and ways to develop new business. After conducting an internet search for resources, she came across the OCC. She has since completed all 20 modules of the business development workshop and all 32 modules of the practice management workshop and plans on completing more.

Applying ideas

"It really worked hand-in-hand with what I was doing, in terms of changing my practice," she says. Working through the OCC modules helped her build on her ideas and really apply them. "At the end of the day, doing the modules actually gave me my basic marketing plan."

As a sole practitioner, Dajczak likes the immediate feedback the OCC provides. "It's an excellent way to learn," she says. "You can do it whenever you want, in your own timeframe, at your own pace. It reaffirms that what you're doing is right. Sometimes it's good to refresh, to make sure you're on the right track. I'm a firm believer in taking CLE programs. I find a lot of these programs aren't always taken advantage of, and that's something that we should be trying to do more of as a profession."

As national Director of Professional Development, Hyde meets regularly with fellow directors from law firms across North America to discuss continuing education. She has talked about the mandatory OCC program, and her sense is that firms are making lawyers more aware of the resources available.

Now in its third year, the program has become entrenched in the routine at Miller Thomson. The firm may ask its lawyers to take other LawPRO- approved CLE programs in combination with the mandatory OCC modules, and expand the program to other provinces. In the meantime, Hyde will be encouraging Miller Thomson's lawyers to take modules that they have not yet completed. "We really want to keep it in the forefront of people's minds."

From Dajczak's perspective, the OCC is definitely worth the time investment. "When I came out of law school, I had taken economics and business and had some practical accounting background. When I think back to articling, the accounting portion was very foreign to a lot of people," she recalls. "As a sole practitioner, you don't always have an office administrator, and it's hard to find the time to review your policies. When you open a practice, you have lots of time to devote to marketing, but as time goes by, you have less. The OCC is a good reminder of things that helped me when I first started practising, and it helped me think of other creative ideas that could work for me. You have to devote the time, but it's worth it."

practicePRO's online COACHING CENTRE is a flexible Web-based self-coaching tool that allows lawyers to enhance their soft skills through self-learning. It was developed as a quick and simple tool to help lawyers become more productive and effective in their professional and personal life by enhancing the people and organizational skills that are essential to being a successful lawyer.

One of the most tangible benefits of the OCC is the \$50 CLE credit that lawyers receive when they complete three OCC modules. This credit is applied to the standard insurance premium. Although the CLE credit has only been around for three years, LawPRO is already starting to see risk management results: eight per cent of lawyers who obtained the CLE credit have reported a claim, while more than 12 per cent of those who did not receive the credit reported a claim. To access the OCC, go to www.practicepro.ca/OCC.

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