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An Agricultural Law Research Article

**ALA Presidential Address:
Networking within the Agricultural Community**

by

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ALA Presidential Address

NETWORKING WITHIN
THE AGRICULTURAL COMMUNITY

*Paul L. Wright**

I. INTRODUCTION: A DAY IN THE LIFE OF AN AGRICULTURAL ATTORNEY

Agricultural attorneys regularly have the opportunity to interact with other professionals working within the agricultural community. As is natural in this profession, frequently there are differences of opinion. The question being raised, are the differing opinions the result of true differences? Could it be that many times the differences are because the parties involved have not taken the time to understand each other or have not taken the time to communicate?

The agricultural legal profession can benefit from taking time to reach out and better understand other points of view. I wonder how many differences are grounded in a lack of thorough communication, or a lack of taking the time to create a forum to really hear another's thoughts and knowledge.

The potential breadth of an agricultural attorney's contacts is unlimited. The contacts may well be with the educational community, agricultural input suppliers, purchasers of agricultural products, those companies providing professional services to the agricultural community, and those entities providing governmental services. This listing is only representative. Imagination can lead to identifying many career paths within each group.

Agriculture has and continues to embark upon dramatic changes. Examples of current changes are: producing for niche markets, government policy allowing freedom to produce, plant and animal alterations due to biotechnology changes, continually larger farming units being put in place, industrialization of agriculture, continued emphasis on international contracts for production and marketing, and the concerns related to farmland preservation. The legal profession has an important role to contribute in each of these dramatic changes.

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Putting “networking” in place is an opportunity—an opportunity for the legal profession to be the catalyst. It is possibly more of an opportunity for the agricultural legal profession than for any other profession. Agricultural attorneys may have more to gain from exchanges of ideas, more to gain from the results of such joint efforts, and less turf to protect.

II. COMPLIMENTARY RELATIONSHIP OF LAW WITH EVERY DISCIPLINE

The relationship between law and all other agricultural disciplines should be thought of as complimentary. The competitive and adversarial relationships may evolve when positions are established without benefiting from networking—without a forum for arriving at a common understanding. These thoughts are not to say that litigation can be erased as true differences occur, but often better legal services can be delivered if agricultural attorneys extend their efforts for networking even beyond their comfort level.

Why might someone avoid participating in a forum for understanding, a forum for developing an idea? Is it because of the time and energy it takes; is it more exciting and self-rewarding to promote one’s individual position; is it because networking is not profitable; or is it because professional jealousies create barriers?

The theme is that when confronting an issue, when developing a position, when writing a contract, when writing a statute, when preparing to teach, the thoughts of others should be sought more aggressively than is done. Sometimes, this approach takes more foresight and planning. Sometimes, a person needs to expose a lack of understanding before finding the common ground. Possibly, the conflict that results in litigation occurs because not enough time was spent in development efforts. Time, energy, and dollar savings as a result of not networking in development of a work product sometimes cost time, energy, dollars, and even friendships in the process of conflict resolution.

The agricultural legal profession has the opportunity to make contact, explore, and network with every career path in the agricultural community. The breadth of interests within the profession of agricultural law are immense. To catch a glimpse of that breadth take a few moments to review the array of topics within *Agricultural Law Update*, the monthly publication of the American Agricultural Law Association, the agendas of the annual symposiums presented by the American Agricultural Law Association, or the topics within the *Drake Journal of Agricultural Law* and other agricultural law journals. Is our profession going far enough to create the forum for discussion among those agriculturists who have an interest in a topic? Agricultural attorneys should serve as the catalyst for the exploration of topics between disciplines.

III. SEEKING WAYS TO NETWORK

How can the suggested networking be accomplished? *Webster's* generally defines networking as 1) the developing of contacts or exchanging of information with others in an informal network, and 2) a group, system, etc., of interconnected or cooperating individuals.¹ Are not the ideas expressed in this definition the ideal concepts to be achieved?

Purposeful networking takes thought, time, and energy. It causes a person to focus on ideas, possible differences, who might be persons with input, and how to accomplish the sharing. Often, the investment of this time and energy can lead to providing more meaningful legal services. If practicing attorneys take an idea prompted by one client's work project, add breadth, and refine the idea through networking, they may end up with an excellent product that allows them to better serve others. If a person is an educator, what can be achieved through networking can lead students be better prepared for tomorrow. If working in government, what can be achieved through networking can lead to even better policies, services, or enforcement efforts.

The many, varied, and innovative developments in communication systems today should allow networking to be achieved better than in the past. All of the traditional plus the most modern means of communication are available. Listening to others, observing others, inviting others to review a writing, face-to-face conversations, seminars on topics, telephone conversations, letters, e-mail, and chat groups on the web all allow one person to explore another person's thoughts and to hone the rough edges of positions being taken. With today's technology, factors such as distance, cultural differences, scheduling, and other barriers should not prevent an agricultural attorney from tapping the best minds as ideas are molded and work products are developed.

IV. CONCLUSION

Networking can be most meaningful by believing that each person is unique. Believing each person has a set of talents that can be shared. Believing in partnering. Believing in interaction. Having a sincere respect for each other. And, having a desire to be supportive of each other. With these confidences and resources, there is hardly an agricultural law issue that cannot be refined and improved as a result of networking. Often agricultural lawyers should be the catalyst for achieving networking. At the same time, there must be an excitement to participate when others take the lead and serve as the catalyst to accomplish networking. Professional organizations such as the American

1. See WEBSTER'S NINTH NEW COLLEGIATE DICTIONARY 794 (1985).

Agricultural Law Association have a real opportunity to promote, cause exploration, and set the stage for achieving the valued networking. Let meaningful networking be one of the challenges of the agricultural law profession.