



## The Detroit News: Lawyers learn nuts and bolts of profession at firm's

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By James V. Higgins / *The Detroit News*

The successful lawyer of the past was a scholar, actor and sleuth. In the future, he or she will need all that and more.

As law firms combine and grow and the profession becomes more competitive, corporate skills will be required: leadership, salesmanship, financial awareness, managerial knowledge and technological prowess.

Law schools today are good at teaching kids to study and argue, but not so handy at preparing students for life in a firm with hundreds of lawyers that's in hot competition with a similar outfit across the street.

That's why Miller Canfield, Michigan's oldest and largest law firm, decided that teaching should become one of its key strategies. The new vehicle for this is known internally as Miller Canfield University, which has five "colleges" devoted to producing the well-rounded, modern attorney.

Each Miller Canfield lawyer is required to take one course per semester, with two semesters held per year, says Robert E. Gilbert, a principal with and former chief executive officer of the firm.

"Of the five colleges, only one is directly related to ongoing education in the law," says Gilbert, who is the unofficial "chancellor" of what is referred to throughout the firm as MCU. "The others are related to things that aren't taught anywhere else as far as we can tell."

For instance: How a law firm works and how to manage one; developing leadership skills; how to use new technology to become more efficient; and one of the most important -- how to build your practice.

MCU is really just another expression of the way American business and professional life has changed in the past 30 years.

Most large companies have vastly expanded their internal training, often in "soft" areas such as teamwork, personal development or corporate culture. CEOs today often see teaching as one of their most important duties. Subjected to new forms of competition, they feel they can't leave anything to chance.

You wouldn't be surprised, for instance, to go into a car assembly plant in Michigan and find workers taking classes in the dynamics of global business competition.

Gilbert says the legal profession in 2002 is far different from the day when he joined Miller Canfield, fresh out of the University of Michigan law school.

"When I started practicing in 1966 the term 'practice development' hadn't been uttered," he says.

Today there are more attorneys and larger law firms looking for clients. Some of them want a nationwide presence.

Typically, large corporations in the past would have a close relationship with a single firm that had wide-ranging competence in the law. But in-house corporate counsel has grown in size and prestige. Today, these corporations are likely to seek competitive bids for legal services of various sorts, just like they do for manufactured parts.

Gilbert says the new environment gives law firms a huge incentive to make sure that clients are well-served.

Marketing the law firm is one thing. Increasingly that means the use of media like other businesses. But practice development, Gilbert says, is more -- it goes to the basic range of competencies and skills the firm can offer.

Practice development "is not a sales course," he says. "We're oriented toward providing a client-friendly service, and that requires retraining."

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