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Trimble: Is there a 'ROI' for young lawyers' bar association involvement?

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EYE ON THE PROFESSION

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This past week, I returned home after spending four very fun days at the Annual Meeting of DRI — The Voice of the Defense Bar in Chicago. Like every international bar association annual meeting, this was a homecoming, a family reunion, a party and a business meeting. It was exhausting and exhilarating. It had education and networking and was a nonstop parade of interesting speakers on every topic in the law and politics. It was food and drink and merriment with old friends and many, many new ones. It was something that I wish every lawyer could experience.

Several times during the meeting, I met young lawyers from firms of all sizes and all parts of the world and the country. As I talked to these excited young lawyers, I heard one theme that was constantly repeated. To a person, they told me that attending the annual meeting was a “tough sell.” They said that their firms were expecting them to come back and present evidence that there was “return on investment” for the time and cost of sending them to Chicago for a few days. They weren’t sure what they would be able to tell their supervisors, and they weren’t sure if they could come back next year unless they had a return on investment this year.

I was saddened and concerned by this news, but not terribly surprised. We live in a time when the billable hour is still king and profitability is a concern of every law firm. Firm managers are rightfully focused on making sure that marketing time and dollars are spent strategically. Lawyers today no longer have the time or the extra funds to join every organization or attend every event or meeting (unless they are crazy like me). Managers and supervisors are insisting that their associates have a plan as to how they will spend their time, and they increasingly must have a business case for why they will join a bar association or attend a seminar.

Here’s the rub: There is no immediate return on investment in a monetary form for the young lawyer who is just starting into bar association participation. Indeed, it is wrong-headed and short-sighted for law firm managers to think that way. Client referrals and attorney referrals come as the result of relationships. Those relationships take time. According to law firm consultant John Remsen of Atlanta, the average relationship takes at least 10 “touches” before a relationship will turn into business. It is not realistic to expect that a young lawyer will attend an event or bar meeting and come back with a new case or a new client. Does it happen? Yes. Is it the norm? No.

Despite the lack of monetary return on investment, young lawyers and their law firms gain huge returns on intangible benefits. Bar association involvement allows young lawyers to learn about their profession and to hear firsthand about the issues that other lawyers and firms may have. Through bar association meetings, young

lawyers begin the process of gaining subject matter competence and reputation. If they are persistent, they get to speak, they get to write, and they get direct contact with clients and other lawyers with similar substantive background. They gain confidence in networking, and they realize that our profession is far more than sitting behind a desk grinding. Above all else, they make friends who will grow up with them and become their network of referrals at a later age.

My pitch to partners who are reading this column is simple. Support your associates in getting involved in the bar. Send them to meetings, and before they go, talk to them about the ways to maximize the experience. Go with them and introduce them to your lawyer friends and show them the way to leadership. If you do this, you have a shot at keeping them, and you will have happier, better informed, and more devoted colleagues.

Take my word for it. There is a return on investment for sending young lawyers to bar association meetings. However, you have to be willing to plant the seed, cultivate and water the seed, and then watch it flower and grow into a leader who is ready to be your next partner and your successor. It will be well worth your investment and your patience. #WillYouBeThere?•

• John C. Trimble (@indytrims) is a senior partner at the Indianapolis firm of Lewis Wagner LLP. He is a self-described bar association “junkie” who admits that he spends an inordinate amount of time on law practice management, judicial independence and legal profession issues. The opinions expressed are those of the author.