
Making the Transition

A Mentoring Case Study

BY JOHN BROWNING AND ROBERT BOGDANOWICZ III



When he made the *Transition to Practice* program a key initiative of his 2009–2010 term as State Bar president, Roland Johnson understood the importance of mentoring. He observed that, “As a profession, we need to connect with young lawyers as early in their career as possible to ensure that they are prepared for the responsible practice of law and are committed to professionalism.” Johnson decided to give statewide exposure to a pilot project developed by the Dallas Bar Association (DBA) under the leadership of Justice Doug Lang of Dallas’ Fifth District Court of Appeals, a project that could be easily tailored for local bar associations throughout Texas. Both Johnson and Justice Lang had been inspired by structured mentoring pro-

grams adopted by states such as Georgia, Ohio, and South Carolina, where bar leaders had recognized that a young lawyer’s ethical values were far more likely to be challenged and shaped by on-the-job experience in the real world than by the limited environment of law school.

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— Roland Johnson
2009–2010 State Bar President

The *Transition to Practice* program (texasbar.com/transition) is a 12-month program targeted at lawyers in their first several years of licensure. These newly licensed attorneys are matched with more experienced volunteer lawyers. Every other month, a group meeting of all participants in the program takes place, with events aimed at helping young lawyers navigate issues such as law practice management, effective client representation, career development, profession-

alism, and pro bono work. During the alternate months, mentors and their mentees meet one-on-one. The program is designed not to take the place of intra-firm mentoring relationships, but rather to complement them.

While the mentor assumes no responsibility for evaluating the work of the younger lawyer, he or she does share insight into the practical skills as well as ethical and professional issues that the mentee may encounter. Although the mentor generally doesn't provide substantive advice to the young lawyer, he or she fulfills the role of mentor by being available to the mentee and acting as a sounding board. Since the program's inception five years ago by the DBA, 743 new lawyers have been matched with mentors. Many mentors have participated since the beginning, taking on a new mentee each year, and there have also been about 275 unduplicated mentors.

A program such as *Transition to Practice* is arguably more important now than at any other time in the history of the American legal profession. New lawyers are facing the most challenging legal market in decades and are battling to pay back crushing student loan debt while contending with a rapidly changing legal landscape. Ever-greater numbers of newly minted law graduates are hanging out their own shingles in the face of dwindling opportunities elsewhere. Consequently, their opportunities to learn from and observe more experienced lawyers have decreased.

To illustrate the benefits of this program, the *Texas Bar Journal* offers the following as a case study in successful mentoring, drawn from an actual mentor-mentee pair from the Dallas Bar Association's *Transition to Practice* project.



The Mentor's Perspective

John Browning

Mentoring has always been an integral part of what I view my role as a lawyer to be and an important part of giving back to the profession and the community. It's also a vital link to the historical roots of our profession; just as young lawyers once "read the law" under the tutelage of an experienced practitioner, lawyers today owe their understanding of the vagaries of attorney-client relationships and their grasp of most practical skills not to law schools, but to veteran lawyers who took the time to educate them in the ways of day-to-day practice. I greatly benefited from time spent with older, wiser lawyers, so it seems only natural to pay it forward by helping to guide young lawyers. Besides being a source of advice for young lawyers within my firm, I found that helping out with the Southern Methodist University (SMU) Dedman School of Law's "Adopt a Law Student" program and the mentoring opportunities through the William "Mac" Taylor American Inn of Court (the whole Inn of Court mission is based on a foundation of mentoring and professionalism) were great ways of giving back.

I first met Rob Bogdanowicz when he was still a law student at SMU. We had much in common, like our New Jersey Catholic school roots, an academic pedigree from Rutgers, and a deep appreciation for pop culture — particularly science fiction. Rob eagerly sought out career advice, and I tried to give him glimpses of real-world practice in the civil litigation trenches. Rob accompanied me to the occasional deposition or hearing and showed great promise on the projects he did for me as a part-time law clerk. I encouraged him in his pursuit of his first full-time job as an associate and later when he had the opportunity to move to a larger regional law firm and hone his skills even more.

Even at different firms, Rob and I regularly stayed in touch, and when we both learned of the *Transition to Practice* program, it only made perfect sense to us to sign up as mentor and mentee. I felt the structure of the program could only add to our informal advice sessions. The six formal programs that make up the curriculum were outstanding and featured preeminent speakers on such topics as avoiding malpractice traps that could ensnare a young lawyer; achieving wellness and satisfaction in one's practice; and what young lawyers need to know about client relations. One program that stood out was a presentation by Bryan Garner on indispensable legal writing tips for beginning lawyers. There was a certain symmetry to this: As a third-year law student at the University of Texas, I had the honor of being Bryan's first research assistant, and he has been a mentor of mine ever since as I've juggled the roles of practicing attorney and legal writer. Now, I got to watch with pride as my mentee correctly answered questions posed by Bryan and was rewarded with one of the books authored by Professor Garner himself, the leading authority on legal writing and legal usage.

In our one-on-one meetings, which became more frequent, I tried to impart what advice I could to Rob on everything from litigation practice pointers to ethics to business development. I had the chance to work with Rob at the same firm and see him progress even further. Eventually, when I was tapped to open the Dallas office of a large national law firm, I didn't have to go very far to find a promising young associate. I asked my

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mentee, Rob, to join me on this new adventure, and I was thrilled when he agreed. He has since taken on a new challenge at a small firm here in Dallas.

I'm fortunate to have had the opportunity to practice with my mentee. I was able to see not only his growing legal skills at work in a well-drafted motion or a well-argued hearing, but also his giving back to the profession through writing, speaking, and bar association activity and leadership. And I foresee the day when Rob takes on a mentee of his own. Even as the pride swells when I reflect back on the path that brought Rob to this point in his career, I realize that a successful mentor-mentee relationship enriches the mentor as much as it does the mentee.



The Mentee's Perspective

Robert Bogdanowicz III

Mentors.

Law firms toss that word around quite a bit, often touting the incredible mentorship programs and pairings available to young associate attorneys who join the firm. While some may follow through, the reality is that it's hard to be honest with someone who also starts out

as your boss — whether directly or indirectly. To me, that kind of mentoring, while valuable, may have difficulty blossoming.

I say that because that's how I felt about my firm's mentorship program. At the time, I was a second-year associate working at a large regional law firm. I loved (and miss) the people I worked with but found it wasn't always easy to say what was on my mind. After all, I was the low man on the totem pole. I didn't expect retaliation of any kind, but I was also conscious of what kind of precedent would be laid by my questions and concerns. To be honest, why shouldn't I have been concerned? These were the people signing my paychecks. I had to be sure I could keep my student loan lender in business each month.

At some point, I found out the Dallas Bar Association had launched the *Transition to Practice* mentoring program, matching young lawyers with experienced lawyers. Each month, the program would host a CLE luncheon for the mentor and mentee. I saw this as an opportunity to foster an existing relationship with John Browning. I originally met John in law school; as a New York/New Jersey transplant, I was searching high and low for someone similar in the Dallas area. It turned out John also attended my alma mater, Rutgers University. We bonded over that commonality — as well as our affection for all things sci-fi.

While we enjoyed that bond for years, I saw the *Transition to Practice* program as an opportunity to take our mentor-mentee relationship to the next level. John had always offered advice when possible, but he was also busy with his practice at another large law firm. Each month, the program hosted a luncheon CLE at the Belo Mansion. John and I would meet for each luncheon and discuss recent developments in our practices. Most important, John would answer all of the ridiculous questions I had about practicing law — everything from how to handle a contentious hearing on a motion to compel to generating a loyal client base.

Eventually, I wasn't just asking John these questions at the monthly meetings. We would meet for lunch, dinner, or our perennial favorite, happy hour. The meetings and emails increased. John would regularly advise me on the aspects of practicing law you can never really ask anyone unless you *know* that person is well aware what a pinky swear truly means.

While the formal luncheons were always enjoyable, they were just the tip of the iceberg. By putting us in the same room — making each of us take the time out of our days to sit down and just *talk* — John's mentorship took on a whole new dimension and helped shape the lawyer I am today. John helped me land my first client. He helped me win my first hearing. He helped me figure out what to do at a corporate representative deposition.

Eventually, John joined the law firm I was with at the time, and I had the incredible opportunity to work with my "outside" mentor — the person I trusted most. When John was approached by another large firm to open its Dallas office, he immediately asked me to join him. I jumped at the chance to

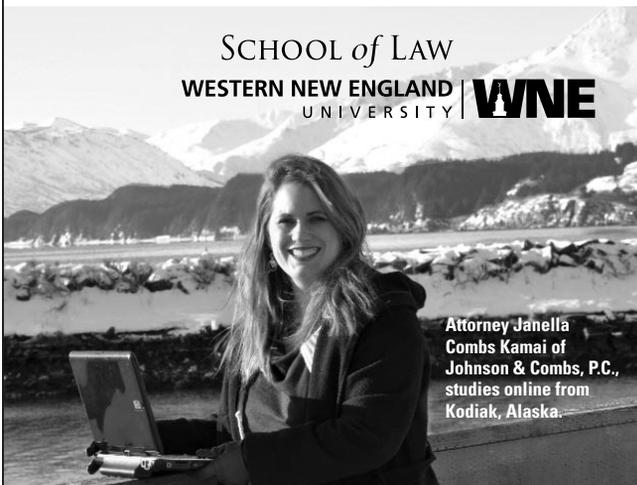
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practice law with my mentor, the person I trust most in the sea of lawyers who have offered their two cents over the years.

I have recently moved on to another firm and new opportunities, but even so, I have to thank the Dallas Bar Association for its mentoring program, because I don't know if I'd be here right now, emailing John to see if he wants to leave the office early to drink margaritas on a patio somewhere.

John Browning

is a partner in Lewis, Brisbois, Bisgaard & Smith, L.L.P. in Dallas. He is author of the syndicated newspaper column "Legally Speaking" and serves on the *Texas Bar Journal* Board of Editors.

Robert Bogdanowicz III

is an associate of Deans & Lyons, L.L.P. in Dallas, where his practice focuses on commercial litigation and intellectual property.



STATE BAR of TEXAS

TRANSITION TO PRACTICE

A MENTORING INITIATIVE FOR LOCAL BAR ASSOCIATIONS

The *Transition to Practice* mentoring program is intended to be easy to use, inexpensive, and readily adaptable by local bar associations in developing a mentoring program for their members. In addition to the **Dallas Bar Association** (dallasbar.org/mentoring), here are examples of how some other local bar associations have implemented *Transition to Practice* or similar mentoring programs.

- The **Amarillo Area Bar Association** has 22 participants in its *Transition to Practice* program. The group meets every other month for a planned CLE program, while individual mentors and mentees meet informally in off months. Topics covered at group meetings this year include dealing with clients, malpractice, legal writing, pro bono service, and wellness. For more information, contact Executive Director JoAnn Holt at director@amarillobar.org.

- The **Austin Bar Association** implemented its version of the *Transition to Practice* program in September for newly licensed lawyers in the Austin area. The program has 65 participants who meet every other month for a year for CLE lunches. For more information, visit austinbar.org/pages/mentoring_main.

- The **Bell County Bar Association's** Criminal Law Section offers mentoring for attorneys practicing criminal law. The program, under the direction of District Court Judge Fancy H. Jezek, includes CLE programs pertaining to new lawyers. For more information, contact Executive Directors Cynthia Champion and Cindi Parker at bell_co_bar@yahoo.com.

- The **Houston Bar Association** offers a Mentor/Protégé Program from its Professionalism Committee. The program, which offers a mentor bank of attorneys willing to be mentors, pairs new attorneys with more experienced ones and currently has 60 matches. For more information, visit hba.org/folder-join-HBA/mentor.htm.

- The **Lubbock County Bar Association** has a mentoring program designed for a small group of newer lawyers to meet on a monthly basis with a more experienced lawyer to discuss topics such as ethics, effective client representation, and law practice management. For more information, visit lcba.org/docs.html and click on "Mentoring Article."

- The **San Antonio Bar Association's** mentoring program, con-

ducted by the Mentoring Committee, is modeled after *Transition to Practice* but is less structured. It includes a group program that meets monthly and focuses on ethics and professionalism, practice areas, and problem solving and ranges from 20 to 50 people. In addition, a one-on-one program allows mentors and mentees to meet on an informal basis. For more information, contact Mentoring Committee Chair Robin Teague at robin@teaguelaw.com.

- The **Smith County Bar Association** in Tyler recently began a mentoring program to assist new lawyers and lawyers new to the area with their transition to practice there. Mentors and mentees will be matched for a one-year term and are asked to meet at least once a month on an informal basis. For more information, visit smithcountybar.com.

- The **Tarrant County Bar Association** implemented the *Transition to Practice* program in January 2010. The program currently has 34 mentors and 46 mentees who meet every other month for a CLE lunch. Topics include attorney-client relationships, local rules, and setting up a solo practice. For more information, contact TCBA Membership Director Cindy Rankin at cindy@tarrantbar.org.