

law office management

Easy Self-Audits for the Busy Law Office



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Easy Self-Audits for the Busy Law Office is not a book you should read. It is, rather, a book you should experience, a bit at a time. Released this spring by the American Bar Association's Law Practice Management Section, this meaty 331-page offering contains enough self-audits to keep a sole practitioner or law firm evaluating and improving for months. The beauty is, however, that you don't have to do every self-audit to benefit, you don't have to do them in any particular order, and you don't have to do them all at one time.

Author Nancy Byerly Jones, formerly a practicing attorney, developed the book's 30 self-audits during her years as Management Counsel and Executive Director of the North Carolina State Bar's Lawyers' Management Assistance Program and later as the owner of NBJ Consulting, Mediation & Retreat Center. Each self-audit has a one-page introduction that includes trouble signs, tips and additional resources for the improvement opportunities highlighted by the completed self-audits. The forms have plenty of room for writing, and the book folds open easily so copies can be made for all attorneys and staff. The book also can be ordered with disks. Jones recommends that all of a firm's attorneys and support staff complete the self-audits to obtain a "much more accurate and global picture of where things really stand in your office or, at a minimum, how they are perceived by everyone in your office."

Each self-audit contains a blend of subjective ("Would you prefer that clients complain to you or to your state bar's grievance division or your jurisdiction's disciplinary agency?") and objective ("Have you checked for any actual or potential conflicts of interest?") queries. The instruments focus on a team approach, even if the "team" is just an attorney and his or her computer. Some questions are duplicated from one questionnaire to another, crossing different categories. This is valuable because it emphasizes the multi-purpose nature of good office procedures and the detriment across functional lines of poor practices. It also helps assure that the lawyer's or firm's systems and procedures are evaluated from all appropriate perspectives.

Of course, completing the self-audits is only the beginning of the practice management improvement process. Unless the findings are used to develop objectives and achieve them, *Easy Self-Audits for the Busy Law Office* will become just one more book on the shelf. The questionnaire's four-column design, which Jones calls "an extremely simplified strategic planning method," is intended to assure that firms follow through on the knowledge they've gained. Column 1 is the "Audit Inquiry"; Column 2 is for "Response and Explanatory Remarks"; Column 3 is for "Improvement Strategy" (be specific!); and Column 4 is for "Targeted Completion Date." Columns 3 and 4 are the ones that need to be revisited – again and again. To facilitate the follow-through that will assure goals are reached, the book includes monthly status checks, organized into four quarterly progress check-up forms. For each area, the choices are simple: "Satisfactory" or "Attention Needed."

Six major categories of self-audits are featured: Client Interactions, Individual Assessment and Planning, Support Staff Management, Office Management Systems and Procedures, Time and Stress Management and "Other." The final category includes self-audits for opening a practice, closing a practice, ethics and goal setting and action planning. The book's final self-audit, "A Little Bit of Everything," is, according to the author, designed for the lawyer or firm who wants to do just one audit. Although it includes only 13 questions, it has many sub-parts and five requests to compile information on a separate sheet of paper. It is, indeed, a fairly comprehensive overview for the practitioner in a hurry.

What's the most effective way to utilize this new tool? To use a phrase beloved among attorneys: "It depends." You may want to pick out a particular topic (for example, Ethics) and have all attorneys and staff complete the self-audit in preparation for a staff meeting or training session. Perhaps your firm has come up against the harsh reality outlined by Jones in the introduction to the File Management questionnaire: "Some studies indicate that individuals lose a minimum of six weeks per year looking for lost files and documents." In that case, you may want

to focus firmwide attention on that self-audit and action to correct the problems identified. You should have plenty of time with that six weeks you stand to recover!

If you're considering moving your practice from your home or large firm to an office sharing arrangement, check out the Office Sharing Self-Audit. Having some trouble with specific procedures? There are self-audits for Calendaring and Docketing, Conflicts of Interest, Confidentiality, Checklists, Computers, Documentation, Marketing, Trust Accounts, and Timekeeping, Billing and Collections, among others. Thinking about whether you really want to be a lawyer and, if so, the setting in which you can best apply your skills and realize your personal goals? Try the Career Reflections for Lawyers self-audit.

If you want to evaluate everything that goes on in your practice and how it affects your ability to satisfy clients, perhaps you'll find it most helpful to organize the self-audit process

around the client relationship, start to finish: Begin with Marketing, move on to Client Selection and Acceptance, evaluate specific systems and procedures to serve your clients, and end up with Client Feedback.

Perhaps you'll find as you work your way through *Easy Self-Audits for the Busy Law Office* that you need additional guidance in improving the areas highlighted by your responses to the questionnaires. The State Bar of Arizona is one of, at last count, 18 bar associations in the United States and Canada that provide affordable resources for their members in managing their practices. The SBA's Law Office Management Assistance Program provides no-charge consultations on any management topic of up to 30 minutes by telephone or at the Arizona Bar Center in Phoenix or the Southern Regional Office in Tucson. Additional services are available at reasonable rates. Please call me at (602) 340-7313 or send me an e-mail at diane.ellis@staff.azbar.org.

How to Order

Easy Self-Audits for the Busy Law Office can be ordered at a discounted rate through the State Bar of Arizona. Call Diane Ellis at (602) 340-7313 or e-mail her at diane.ellis@staff.azbar.org

The book is also available through the American Bar Association Web site at www.abanet.org.

Cost:

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