

**LEGAL ETHICS OPINION 1872. VIRTUAL LAW OFFICE AND USE OF EXECUTIVE OFFICE SUITES.**

This opinion is an examination of the ethical issues involved in a lawyer’s or firm’s use of a virtual law office, including cloud computing, and/or executive office suites. These issues include marketing, supervision of lawyers and nonlawyers in the firm, and competence and confidentiality when using technology to interact with or serve clients.

A virtual law practice involves a lawyer/firm interacting with clients partly or exclusively via secure Internet portals, emails, or other electronic messaging.<sup>1</sup> This practice may be combined with an executive office rental, where a lawyer rents access to a shared office suite or conference room. This space is generally either unstaffed or staffed by an employee of the rental company who provides basic support services to all users of the space, rather than by an employee of the lawyer. The space is also not exclusive to the lawyer — even if she has exclusive access to a particular office or conference room, the suite is open to all other “tenants.” Lawyers who maintain a virtual practice, who work from home, or who wish to expand their geographic profile without the higher costs of exclusive office space and staff all use these spaces as client meeting locations. In other words, virtual law offices and executive office suites do not always go together, but they frequently do.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephanie Kimbro, a practitioner and scholar of virtual law offices, defines a virtual law practice as one where “[t]he use of an online client portal allows for the initiation of the attorney/client relationship through to completion and payment for legal services. Attorneys operate an online backend law office as a completely web-based practice or in conjunction with a traditional law office.” <http://virtuallawpractice.org/about/>, accessed Jan. 22, 2013.

## APPLICABLE RULES AND OPINIONS

The applicable Rules of Professional Conduct are Rules 1.1<sup>2</sup>, 1.6(a) and (d)<sup>3</sup>, 5.1(a) and (b)<sup>4</sup>, 5.3(a) and (b)<sup>5</sup>, and 7.1<sup>6</sup>. The relevant legal ethics opinions are LEOs 1600, 1791, 1818, and 1850.

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### <sup>2</sup> **Rule 1.1. Competence.**

A lawyer shall provide competent representation to a client. Competent representation requires the legal knowledge, skill, thoroughness and preparation reasonably necessary for the representation.

### <sup>3</sup> **Rule 1.6. Confidentiality of Information.**

(a) A lawyer shall not reveal information protected by the attorney-client privilege under applicable law or other information gained in the professional relationship that the client has requested be held inviolate or the disclosure of which would be embarrassing or would be likely to be detrimental to the client unless the client consents after consultation, except for disclosures that are impliedly authorized in order to carry out the representation, and except as stated in paragraphs (b) and (c).

(b) To the extent a lawyer reasonably believes necessary, the lawyer may reveal:

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(6) information to an outside agency necessary for statistical, bookkeeping, accounting, data processing, printing, or other similar office management purposes, provided the lawyer exercises due care in the selection of the agency, advises the agency that the information must be kept confidential and reasonably believes that the information will be kept confidential.

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(d) A lawyer shall make reasonable efforts to prevent the inadvertent or unauthorized disclosure of, or unauthorized access to, information protected under this Rule.

### <sup>4</sup> **Rule 5.1. Responsibilities of Partners and Supervisory Lawyers.**

(a) A partner in a law firm, or a lawyer who individually or together with other lawyers possesses managerial authority, shall make reasonable efforts to ensure that the firm has in effect measures giving reasonable assurance that all lawyers in the firm conform to the Rules of Professional Conduct.

(b) A lawyer having direct supervisory authority over another lawyer shall make reasonable efforts to ensure that the other lawyer conforms to the Rules of Professional Conduct.

### <sup>5</sup> **Rule 5.3. Responsibilities Regarding Nonlawyer Assistants.**

With respect to a nonlawyer employed or retained by or associated with a lawyer:

(a) a partner or a lawyer who individually or together with other lawyers possesses managerial authority in a law firm shall make reasonable efforts to ensure that the firm has in effect measures giving reasonable assurance that the person's conduct is compatible with the professional obligations of the lawyer;

(b) a lawyer having direct supervisory authority over the nonlawyer shall make reasonable efforts to ensure that the person's conduct is compatible with the professional obligations of the lawyer; and

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### <sup>6</sup> **Rule 7.1. Communications Concerning a Lawyer's Services.**

A lawyer shall not make a false or misleading communication about the lawyer or the lawyer's services. A communication is false or misleading if it contains a material misrepresentation of fact or law, or omits a fact necessary to make the statement considered as a whole not materially misleading.

## ANALYSIS

Virtual law offices involve issues that are present in all types of law offices – confidentiality, communication with clients, and supervision of employees – but that manifest themselves in a new way in this context. *See also* LEO 1850 (exploring similar concerns in context of outsourcing legal support services).

A lawyer must always act competently to protect the confidentiality of clients' information, regardless of how that information is stored/transmitted, but this task may be more difficult when the information is being transmitted and/or stored electronically through third-party software and storage providers. The lawyer is not required, of course, to absolutely guarantee that a breach of confidentiality cannot occur when using an outside service provider. Rule 1.6 only requires the lawyer to act with reasonable care to protect information relating to the representation of a client. *See* Rule 1.6(d). When a lawyer is using cloud computing or any other technology that involves the use of a third party for the storage or transmission of data, the lawyer must follow Rule 1.6(b)(6) and exercise care in the selection of the vendor, have a reasonable expectation that the vendor will keep the data confidential and inaccessible by others, and instruct the vendor to preserve the confidentiality of the information. The lawyer will have to examine the third party provider's use of technology and terms of service in order to know whether it adequately safeguards client information, and if the lawyer is not able to make this assessment on her own, she will have to consult with someone qualified to make that determination.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *See* LEO 1818, where the Committee concluded that a lawyer could permissibly store files electronically and destroy all paper documents as long as the client was not prejudiced by this practice, but noted that the lawyer may need to consult outside technical assistance and support for assistance in using such a system.

Similarly, although the method of communication does not affect the lawyer's duty to communicate with the client, if the communication will be conducted primarily or entirely electronically, the lawyer may need to take extra precautions to ensure that communication is adequate and that it is received and understood by the client. The Committee previously concluded in LEO 1791 that a lawyer could permissibly represent clients with whom he had no in-person contact, because Rule 1.4 "in no way dictates whether the lawyer should provide that information in a meeting, in writing, in a phone call, or in any particular form of communication. In determining whether a particular attorney has met this obligation with respect to a particular client, what is critical is *what* information was transmitted, not *how*." On the other hand, one of the aspects of communication required by Rule 1.4 is that a lawyer must "explain a matter to the extent reasonably necessary to permit the client to make informed decisions regarding the representation." Use of the word "explain" necessarily implies that the lawyer must take some steps beyond merely providing information to make sure that the client actually is in a position to make informed decisions. A lawyer may not simply upload information to an Internet portal and assume that her duty of communication is fulfilled without some confirmation from the client that he has received and understands the information provided.

Finally, the technology that enables a lawyer to practice "virtually" without any face-to-face contact with clients can also allow lawyers and their staff to work in separate locations rather than together in centralized offices. As with other issues discussed in this opinion, a partner or other managing lawyer in a firm always has the same responsibility to take reasonable steps to supervise subordinate lawyers and nonlawyer assistants, but the meaning of "reasonable" steps may vary depending upon the structure of the law firm and its practice. Additional measures may be necessary to supervise staff who are not physically present where the lawyer works.

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The use of an executive office/suite rental or any other kind of shared, non-exclusive space, either in conjunction with a virtual law practice or as an addition to a “traditional” office- based practice, raises a separate issue. A non-exclusive office space or virtual law office that is advertised as a location of the firm must be an office where the lawyer provides legal services. A lawyer may not list alternative or rented office spaces in public communications for the purpose of misleading prospective clients into believing that the lawyer has a more geographically diverse practice and/or more firm resources than is actually the case. *See* Rule 7.1. As discussed above in the context of Internet-based service providers, a lawyer must also pay careful attention to protecting confidentiality if any client information is stored or received in a shared space staffed by nonlawyers who are not employees of the law firm and may not be aware of the nature or extent of the duty of confidentiality.