



SMALL PRACTICE NETWORKING GUIDE



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1. BACKGROUND

Recommendation 5 of the *Crowe Market Study of Sole Practitioners and Smaller Legal Practices in Ireland* relates to membership and networking options for sole practitioners and smaller practices and the associated benefits. The recommendation is as follows:

RECOMMENDATION 5

Building networks/strategic collaborations by smaller firms

Smaller legal practices need to build greater networks within the sector and with external bodies. This recommendation is also interconnected with furthering business development opportunities and marketing efforts.

As sole practitioners or smaller practices you should seek out collaboration opportunities within the legal profession itself and with relevant external bodies and SME networks. This guide has been developed to help you achieve this.

The Crowe Report highlighted that sole practitioners and smaller practices should build on existing collaborative relationships with external bodies in order to:

- Increase knowledge sharing and learning opportunities,
- Introduce innovations and new approaches that have worked in other small businesses,
- Access different skillsets, for example, external advisors, specialists and business contacts such as consultants,
- Increase chances of business referrals and widen their network of business contacts, and
- Help reduce feelings of isolation associated with being a smaller practice and a sole practitioner in particular.

This guide will provide you with an understanding of the benefits of joining business networks and the services and supports provided. You will also find information on maximising memberships, as well as potential networks that your practice might consider joining.

The Appendix contains a list of networks and membership organisations, divided into different categories based on the network's focus, service and type of networking opportunity. The list also provides:

- Links for further information,
- A description of the organisation and/or membership, and
- A description of the relevant activities and opportunities that smaller practices may avail of.

2 BUSINESS NETWORKS OVERVIEW

2.1 What are Business Networks?

A business or professional network is a group of businesses, often working in different sectors and industries, that collaborate with one another to achieve common objectives, such as information sharing, learning and development, networking, and the expansion of current contacts.

A business network is suitable for professionals from a variety of business functions, sectors and industries, and is especially important for small businesses. Joining business networks and membership organisations enables small businesses to interact with like-minded individuals who can be valuable sources of information and support, as well as generating business leads.

Overall, a network provides a cost-effective way of promoting yourself and your practice. Whether face to face at meetings, events or training days, or through online networks such as LinkedIn and Twitter, business networking will enable your practice to develop mutually beneficial relationships with other contacts.

2.2 Services Offered

There are a number of typical business services provided through networks and membership organisations. These services generally aim to connect businesses and represent business interests, but the services provided can vary. Factors such as the number of members, geographical spread of members, availability of resources, and the location of the network itself, will all have an impact on its focus and the benefits which it will be able to offer to members.

Some of the services and supports offered by business networks/groups include:

- Professional development through learning and training programmes, seminars and courses,
- Industry/sector insights and research, such as business trends and analysis,
- Networking opportunities, including networking

breakfasts, annual dinners, and/or events based on SME issues,

- Support resources such as templates, information sheets and education materials on networking, public speaking, business best practice, regulation and compliance and human resource management,
- Room hire,
- Representation and policy influencing,
- Mentoring,
- Award and recognition programmes,
- Marketing, digital media and PR support and advice, and
- Financial supports and advice on funding options.

2.3 Benefits of Joining a Network

The range of services available across the different networks can be of benefit to your practice, and can assist you in successfully meeting the growth goals that you have set for your practice in your growth strategy. In addition, many of the challenges associated with running a smaller practice can be reduced through the services and supports offered.

The benefits of joining a network apply, regardless of sector. Joining a network provides smaller practices with an opportunity to share experiences with SMEs from other industries, as well as listening to their experiences, opinions and views. It could also result in your practice implementing business practices it might not have considered previously.

Examples of the benefits include:

- **Partner for scale:** strategic partnerships and collaboration with other legal practices or another professional service firm, give rise to the potential to win larger tenders or cases,
- **Reducing isolation:** development of a peer network,
- **Collective problem solving:** many smaller practices will face similar problems and issues. By working together, network members can

discuss different methods they have used to address challenges that face their business. This could lead to practices implementing new and better problem-solving processes,

- **Financial benefits:** achieving cost reductions through sharing resources, office space, etc,
- **Human resource benefits:** development of skills and abilities, greater access to employees, access to specialists in different sectors, information sharing, knowledge transfer, etc, and
- **Business referrals and new business opportunities:** building a network and developing professional business relationships can also increase the number of clients you source through recommendations or referrals.

2.4 Shared SME Issues

A number of common topics and issues across SMEs in different industries and sectors arose during the course of research for the Crowe market study. The *Crowe Market Study of Sole Practitioners and Smaller Legal Practices in Ireland* will allow your practice to gain knowledge and a better understanding of innovation, processes and technologies that other SMEs might be using to tackle challenges and advance their business.

Research has shown that current issues and topics that are relevant to both smaller practices and other SMEs include:

- Access to credit for growth,
- Solutions to recruitment and retention issues,
- Affordability (and availability) of workspace, including shared office space,
- Mental health and wellbeing supports,
- Increasing regulation and compliance responsibilities,
- The challenges of owner-managed businesses,
- Finding efficiencies and the opportunities and costs of technology for SMEs,
- Performance and time management,
- Succession planning, and
- Tackling the increasing cost of running a business.

3 MAXIMISING MEMBERSHIPS AND MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR NETWORKS

Before you fully commit to your networking efforts and join new networks or membership organisations, you should aim to maximise the potential of any current networks or groups that your practice is part of. This can be done, as follows:

- **Ensure the right fit:** It is important that you re-view your existing network(s) or membership(s) to ensure it/they are the right fit. Factors to consider include: the profile of members, geography, size and services offered,
- **Know the benefits:** Many membership organisations, such as the Law Society, have a number of benefits for their members. Each practice should ensure they are fully aware of and making use of the benefits already available,
- **Monitor your current level of activity against set objectives:** If you have set objectives, you will be able to monitor and identify whether or not you have achieved the goals you intended, and, if not, plan a new course of action.

3.1 Join New Networks

If you have sufficiently maximised your current networks and memberships, and you have capacity to join more, it may be worth looking into other options that can assist in achieving your goals for business and professional development. Deciding which network(s) your practice should join is dependent on a range of factors, including:

- The frequency and timing of events, meetings, information sessions, etc.,
- Capacity within the practice to commit to and make time for employees to engage,
- The profile of the network's members,
- Areas of development within the firm and learning or training opportunities available,
- Any requirement for general or sector specific networks,
- Budget, and
- The location and travel required.

3.2 Approach to Networks

To ensure you make the most of your networks, you should:

- Set targets to ensure you are focused on the purpose of your networking activities. For example, meet two prospective clients per event or have one follow-up meeting every month,
- Be prepared to find out who will be at the events you attend, decide who you want to talk to, prepare an "elevator pitch", have specific "asks" for the people you meet, and bring relevant marketing materials and business cards,
- Stay connected by maintaining your connection with contacts on professional social networks such as LinkedIn and Twitter. It is also important to follow up with any actions discussed, schedule another meeting, send on required information, etc.,
- Remember that you will only get out of your networks what you put in. You could increase your profile by joining a committee, hosting events, or being a guest speaker, for example,
- Share knowledge internally with the team, for example, lessons learned, contacts, supports and tools, and
- Become an effective networker. If required, attend training or public speaking courses to help you prepare, for example the Networking Summit or the Networking Institute.

3.3 Network Planner

As outlined above, planning your approach once you join any network or membership organisation is vital. If you are planning on joining more than one network or organisation, you will need to plan your approach to each one individually in order to achieve the best results. A network planner is a valuable tool to plan, track and compare your activities with each network, and provides a way to monitor results against aims and objectives.

A sample network planner is shown below.

QUESTIONS TO ANSWER	NETWORK/GROUP 1	NETWORK/GROUP 2
What is my aim?		
Ideal connections (people)		
Network profile/sector/interests (relevance to my practice)		
Tactical group notes/tips – what works well?		
Elevator speech (for this group)		
What can I do for these members?		
What can these members do for me?		
Diary dates		
Targets/expectations		
Comparison with other marketing activities		
Time spent		
Scheduled tasks		

4 NETWORK OPTIONS AND NEXT STEPS

This chapter briefly lists the potential networks and membership organisations that might be of interest to sole practitioners and smaller practices. These are listed in greater detail and divided into different categories in the appendix, which covers business organisations, specialist or sector-specific organisations, chambers of commerce, hubs and co-working spaces, and enterprise centres. The appendix also contains:

- Links for further information,
- A description of the organisation and/or membership, and
- A description of the relevant activities that smaller practices may avail of.

4.1 Potential Networks, Groups and Membership Organisations

There are a number of networking opportunities provided by the Law Society of Ireland. As a membership organisation, it provides a host of activities and supports, such as training programmes, CPD courses, diploma courses, the Law Society Gala, CSR initiatives, venue hire, workshops, masterclasses and more. As well as networking opportunities, the Society provides a number of resources to help practices, including information, tools, templates, and standard agreements. These can help reduce cost, time, etc on a range of practice work.

Other business networks, many both national and regional, include:

- **Small Firms Association (SFA):** SFA describes itself as the “Voice of Small Business” in Ireland. It represents a diverse membership of businesses with fewer than 50 employees,
- **Local enterprise offices (LEOs):** There are various LEOs across the country that provide advice, information and support to any individual intending to set up or grow their business,
- **Chambers of commerce:** There are chambers of commerce in every major town and region in the

country. A chamber consists of local business representatives who join together to promote the economic and social development of their community, with the aim of making it a better place in which to live, work, and do business.

4.2 Other Networking Options

There are a range of other options available to your practice to increase your network:

- **Become a member of a board:** there are a number of opportunities to sit on a board, such as serving on a non-profit board. This is a worthwhile way of increasing your practice’s recognition and boosting your public profile,
- **Share office space:** sharing office space with another business or legal practice will present you with a great opportunity for business networking, while also reducing your overheads through resource sharing,
- **Increase social media activity:** this can be achieved across networks such as LinkedIn and Twitter, and it is possible to make valuable and rewarding connections across digital platforms,
- **Sponsorship opportunities:** there are many national and local events throughout the year that require sponsorship. Your practice should consider sponsoring an event that would provide access to your target market(s). This is a source of advertising and will increase awareness of your services,
- **Awards and competitions:** a number of networks and organisations run annual awards and monthly competitions. Entering and being nominated for awards will result in recognition within the business and/or legal community. Awards may also lead to increased trust from potential clients, and an increased possibility of them choosing your firm for their legal services,
- **Corporate social responsibility (CSR):** by increasing your CSR activities you will establish a number of new contacts within the charities and other businesses that are similarly engaged.

Examples include in-service days, fundraising cycles or runs, and more,

- **Hobbies/interests/clubs/sports:** Offer extra-curricular activities for members of staff. This can increase networking opportunities through group events, for example, tag rugby tournaments, games nights, etc,
- **Speak at engagements or provide expert opinion:** put yourself forward for speaking engagements, opinion pieces or content creation. This is an effective way of making new contacts in different industries and sectors, building your public profile, and emphasising your areas of expertise,
- **Provide training or mentoring:** by providing training and mentoring to other small businesses or individuals, you can not only further develop professional relationships, but you can enhance peer recognition and become recognised as an expert on a particular subject matter.

4.3 Next Steps

After careful review and consideration of this document, you should decide which of the networks/groups and membership organisations should be progressed from the listings in the appendix, and what can be achieved by doing so. In some cases, the appropriate action may be to join, whereas for others it may be to attend relevant events as a guest of another member, to offer to speak at events, or to provide content or be interviewed for a magazine or newsletter on a topic of expertise. There are various possibilities and some networks will be more suitable than others, depending on what you want to get out of your involvement.

Once the above factors have been considered, it may be worthwhile to share responsibility among staff, if possible, and implement a tracking system so that your practice can measure the benefits of its new and existing memberships.

These memberships should be reviewed on an annual basis, and become part of the practice's growth strategy as a core activity of business development.

Appendix: Networking & Organisation Listing for Small Practice

A large number of networks and organisations are listed in the accompanying Appendix. We have included a variety that cover different locations, sectors, size, focus, and more. While there are examples for each county and region, it should be noted that the list is not exhaustive, as there may well be networks that are not on the list either because they are new or their information or existence is not as visible online as others. The following categories are included:

- Business organisations
- Women's networks
- Specialist areas
- Chambers of commerce
- Local Enterprise Centres
- Hubs and co-working spaces
- Enterprise centres

NOTES

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