

Connecting On-line....Two Examples Affordable Justice Program - Lawyers Aid Canada¹

Heidi Mottahedin, C Med, Acc FM, CSFT, Executive Director, Lawyers Aid Canada

No current initiative, public or private, fully addresses the broad-spectrum issue of access to justice. While legal aid programs provide much needed legal assistance to the neediest Canadians with specific and limited legal issues, extending their mandates to include individuals in higher income brackets and a wider range of legal issues would likely be prohibitively expensive and probably unsustainable with current funding models. A large segment of Canada's population – comprising the average middle-class – is effectively shut out of the justice system. Justice is not served, therefore, for thousands who forgo the legal process because they face a system that has priced itself out of their reach.

The legal profession has a crucial role to play in providing access to justice and must be proactively engaged in any collective effort to remedy the problem. The Lawyers Aid Canada Affordable Justice program allows lawyers to provide access to justice for lower-income members of the public needing legal help, who can demonstrably not afford traditional fees, and yet do not qualify for legal aid.

Participating lawyers agree to devote a portion of their practice at reduced hourly fees to cases of low and medium income clients. Fees are calculated according to a sliding scale, taking into account

A Better Mousetrap?

Michael Carabash, BA, LLB, MBA, President, Dynamic Lawyers Ltd, and Principal, Carabash Law

Toronto lawyer Michael Carabash thinks he has come up with a better way to connect clients and lawyers and thereby provide the public with better access to justice. Last year, Carabash launched www.DynamicLawyers.com – a website that allows users to freely and anonymously post their legal issue(s) and get free information and quotes from Toronto lawyers.

Motivated to start the website after reading Richard Susskind's book, *The Future of Law*, and from watching the success of popular websites such as free classified site www.Craigslist.org and auction site www.eBay.com, Carabash wanted to come up with a "specialized form of Craigslist for the legal industry". With the help of two business school friends, he spent much of last year developing www.DynamicLawyers.com.

The website tries to address the various difficulties everyday people have in finding the right lawyer for the right price. Such difficulties include people having to pay hundreds of dollars for an initial consultation with a lawyer, relying (sometimes to their detriment) on word-of-mouth or the Yellow Pages to find a lawyer, and turning to the Law Society of Upper Canada's Lawyer Referral Services (which costs users \$6 for a 30 minute conversation with only one lawyer).

Unlike these traditional methods of finding the right lawyer, www.DynamicLawyers.com is completely free of charge for users. Posts are made anonymously and remain on the website for up to 45 days, and users are capable of obtaining information from multiple lawyers who focus in the area of law requested. Users decide whether to make their post public, where all website visitors can see them, or private, so only lawyers registered on the website can view them. Every time a new post is made, it is displayed on the website on the appropriate public or private page and is also automatically forwarded via e-mail to those lawyers who practice in the legal area requested. Those lawyers can then respond instantly to user posts with information and quotes. This process ensures that users are receiving information and quotes from lawyers who practice in the specific legal area requested.

For lawyers, the benefits include being able to conveniently pitch their services to those looking for legal help. Lawyers pay only a modest fee of \$30 per month for the right to respond to posts on the website. The website also features a blog for registered lawyers to express their views and promote their services. It also contains statistics and reports relevant to the Toronto legal community and general public. The website will also soon start to feature a database of free, short, and practical legal guides written by Toronto lawyers.

Since launching last November, www.DynamicLawyers.com has been featured in various Toronto media (Globe and Mail, Toronto Star, Toronto Sun, CFRB1010 radio) and legal trade publications (Law Times, Lawyers Weekly, Canadian Lawyer). The website has been a hit both for users, who love the idea of getting specialized lawyers competing on pricing, and for lawyers, who can conveniently and cost-effectively market their particular services to those who need them. Based on its initial success, there are plans to expand www.DynamicLawyers.com beyond its geographic (limited cities in Ontario only) and functional limits.

Michael Carabash, BA, LLB, MBA
President, Dynamic Lawyers™
Tel: (416) 286-3127
Fax: 1 (888) 882-3736