ETHICAL RISKS OF ONLINE COMMUNICATIONS BY ATTORNEYS:

Email Communications

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Mark J. Fucile
Fucile & Reising LLP
mark@frllp.com
503.224.4895
www.frllp.com
INTRODUCTION

1. Protecting confidentiality when communicating electronically

2. Avoiding “unintended” clients
PROTECTING CONFIDENTIALITY

► Ethical Framework

► Practical Solutions

► Practical Consequences
ETHICAL FRAMEWORK

- Competency—ABA Model Rule 1.1
- Confidentiality—ABA Model Rule 1.6
EVOLUTION OF THE LAW


► 2002/03: ABA Updates Model Rules

► Today: State adoption of Model Rules
ABA FORMAL ETHICS OPINION 99-413

► Emphasized federal law:
  ♦ Electronic Communications Privacy Act

► Need to balance means with security
ABA UPDATES MODEL RULES

► Model Rule 1.6: Comments 16 & 17

► Emphasize duties of competency and confidentiality

► Need to balance means with security
Acting Competently to Preserve Confidentiality

[16] A lawyer must act competently to safeguard information relating to the representation of a client against inadvertent or unauthorized disclosure by the lawyer or other persons who are participating in the representation of the client or who are subject to the lawyer's supervision. See Rules 1.1, 5.1 and 5.3.

[17] When transmitting a communication that includes information relating to the representation of a client, the lawyer must take reasonable precautions to prevent the information from coming into the hands of unintended recipients. This duty, however, does not require that the lawyer use special security measures if the method of communication affords a reasonable expectation of privacy. Special circumstances, however, may warrant special precautions. Factors to be considered in determining the reasonableness of the lawyer's expectation of confidentiality include the sensitivity of the information and the extent to which the privacy of the communication is protected by law or by a confidentiality agreement. A client may require the lawyer to implement special security measures not required by this Rule or may give informed consent to the use of a means of communication that would otherwise be prohibited by this Rule.
STATE ADOPTION

> Most states have adopted ABA Model Rules and comments

> Updated list available on ABA Center for Professional Responsibility’s web site at www.abanet.org/cpr
PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS

► Focus on protecting confidentiality
► Measures have to correspond to the circumstances and the information involved
► Some solutions are technological
► Many solutions rely on judgment & communication
PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCES

► Issues for bar discipline

► Civil claims
  ◆ Claims for breach of fiduciary duty
  ◆ Legal malpractice
  ◆ Fee forfeiture
AVOIDING “UNINTENDED” CLIENTS

► ABA Model Rule 1.18: Duties to Prospective Clients

► Comment 2: Unsolicited Communications
[2] Not all persons who communicate information to a lawyer are entitled to protection under this Rule. A person who communicates information unilaterally to a lawyer, without any reasonable expectation that the lawyer is willing to discuss the possibility of forming a client-lawyer relationship, is not a "prospective client" within the meaning of paragraph (a).
STATE LAW CONTROLS

► RPCs don’t control whether an attorney-client relationship exists

► Controlled by state law

► Most require subjective belief by the client and objective reasonableness of that belief
PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS

► Technological
  ♦ “Pop-up” warnings
  ♦ Web site disclaimers

► Common sense communications
PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCES

► Conflicts

► Duties to nonclients

► Example:

*Barton v. U.S. District Court*,
410 F.3d 1104 (9th Cir. 2005)