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High Tech Ethics: New ABA Opinion on Metadata

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Imagine this scenario: You are negotiating a major contract for a client. Relations with your counterpart on the other side are polite and professional. Nonetheless, whenever you seem to be on the verge of agreeing on particular points, the other side injects new issues that are prolonging the negotiations. You know that your counterpart is answering to a team of executives but you and your client are not sure who it is on the other side that may be calling the shots. You receive a new version of the draft contract from your counterpart in Word via email. Your teenager has told you that there's something called "metadata" "embedded" in electronic documents coming in the original word processing format that includes information about both when and who made changes to documents. Can you look at the metadata to determine who on the other side is directing the nettlesome changes?

There is no direct guidance here in the form of an Oregon State Bar ethics rule or opinion. Other states that have examined the issue have come to varying conclusions. The American Bar Association's Standing Committee on Ethics and Professional Responsibility, however, recently issued an ethics opinion on the review and use of metadata. Although the ABA's ethics opinions are not controlling, the opinion, 06-442, offers a useful summary of both the law and the

issues in this area. It is available on the ABA Center for Professional Responsibility's web site at www.abanet.org/cpr and looks at the issues from the perspective of both the sender and the recipient.

From the Sender's Perspective. 06-442 draws a distinction between documents produced in the course of formal discovery and those simply exchanged during negotiations.

On the former, it notes that a producing party may have a duty to produce metadata if relevant and requested or to assert any appropriate privilege because ABA Model Rule 3.4(a) (like its Oregon equivalent) prohibits lawyers from obstructing another's access to evidence or unlawfully altering or concealing documents. The new federal electronic discovery rules that went into effect this past December sharpen that point in federal litigation.

On the latter, it notes that a lawyer's duty of competent representation generally includes an obligation to protect a client's confidential information under Model Rules 1.1 (competence) and 1.6 (confidentiality) (which are also similar to their Oregon equivalents). Although 06-442 carefully sidesteps the issue of whether a lawyer who allows confidential information to slip through to the other side in the form of metadata has violated the standard of care in either a liability or a regulatory sense, it counsels sending documents that might otherwise contain such information in an "imaged" or "hard copy" format (such as fax, "pdf" or simply paper), "scrubbing" such information (using software designed for this

function) from the document before sharing it with the other side or executing a “claw back” agreement with the other side (allowing each party to “claw back” privileged documents that were inadvertently produced). Beyond confidential information, 06-442 notes that virtually all electronic documents that are in their original word processing format (such as Word or WordPerfect) contain a variety of metadata that is not confidential and, therefore, may be shared with the other side.

From the Receiver’s Perspective. 06-442 predicates its comments on the receiver’s end with the assumption that the lawyer recipient has obtained the document lawfully and, therefore, is not in breach of Model Rule 4.4(a) (which prohibits gathering evidence in a way that violates the rights of a third party and which is similar to its Oregon equivalent).

In either a discovery or negotiating context, 06-442 counsels that a lawyer on the receiving end is not prohibited in the first instance from looking at metadata in a document that the lawyer receives from the other side. If, however, the metadata contains what appears to be inadvertently produced privileged information, then Model Rule 4.4(b) (which is substantively identical in both the ABA and Oregon versions) directs that the lawyer notify his or her counterpart on the other side of the receipt of the information involved. At that point, both the ABA and Oregon versions of RPC 4.4(b) characterize whether privilege has been waived as question of substantive evidence law rather than a

matter of professional ethics. Oregon State Bar Formal Ethics Opinion 2005-150 discusses inadvertent production of privileged materials from the ethics perspective and *Goldsborough v. Eagle Crest Partners*, 314 Or 336, 838 P2d 1069 (1992), and *In re Sause Brothers Ocean Towing*, 144 FRD 111 (D Or 1991), are the leading cases in Oregon's state and federal courts on privilege waiver from an evidentiary perspective. OSB Formal Ethics Opinion 2005-150 also discusses the potential disqualification risk for a recipient of simply using an opponent's privileged information without first obtaining a court's ruling that privilege has been waived. OSB Formal Ethics Opinion 2005-150 is available on the OSB's website at www.osbar.org.

Summing Up. ABA Formal Opinion 06-442 is neither the only nor even the last word on the use of metadata. As we move further into an era when documents of all types are increasingly shared in electronic formats, however, it offers both a useful summary of where the law is and where it may be headed in the years ahead.

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