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ABA TECHSHOW

## State bar was the key to open profession to tech and collaboration

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*Logo from the Florida State Bar website.*

It's not easy telling an entire state full of colleagues and superiors that they need to move on from a business model that has served their industry for centuries. But that's exactly what three Florida lawyers did when they began pushing the lawyers in their state to embrace technology and collaboration with nonlawyers.

During a Saturday morning plenary session at ABA Techshow (<http://techshow.com>), Florida State Bar President Ramon Abadin (<http://www.sedgwicklaw.com/ramon-a-abadin/>), University of Miami law professor and founder of Law Without Walls Michele DeStefano (<http://lawwithoutwalls.org/destefano/>) and John Stewart (<http://www.rosswayswan.com/attorneys/partners/john-mitchell-stewart>) of Rossway Swan Tierney Barry Lacey & Oliver exchanged war stories while encouraging the lawyers in attendance to demand their respective state bars promote technological competence from their members.

Abadin and Stewart admitted that they were recent converts to technology and found it ironic that they were even at Techshow. Abadin revealed that, as he was preparing to begin his term as bar president, he hadn't planned on doing anything to promote awareness of technology amongst the bar at large.

"I was just planning stay the course, be the president of nothing," said Abadin. Instead, he credited panel moderator and ABA Techshow vice-chair Adriana Linares (<http://www.lawtechpartners.com/about.html>) with changing his mind on the importance of technology. "As I journeyed through Florida and spoke with members of the bar, I realized there was a profound lack of understanding of just how much tech drives our professional lives," Abadin said.

Abadin decided to make technology one of the focal points of his presidency, and even took his office paperless. He got help from another former tech agnostic. Stewart admitted that, as recently as three years ago, he didn't even have PowerPoint on his computer. Instead, he just had his secretary print out the slides and give them to him on paper.

"I knew nothing about technology," Stewart said. "And it was extremely daunting to try and learn about it, but there's nothing you can do except start learning."

As Stewart realized how important tech was to his practice, he began pushing for the Florida Bar to mandate that its lawyers take several hours of CLE every year relating to legal technology. Abadin wanted 10 hours, but after what he described as "pushback" from the bar, he agreed to three hours and has submitted it to the Supreme Court of Florida for approval.

DeStefano, meanwhile, noted that the legal academic sphere can be even more resistant to change.

“I was pretty frustrated with legal education and the hierarchy and walls that existed, and the lack of embracing, not just technology, but the new globalized world that required interaction with different disciplines and schools of different rank and a connection between practicing lawyers and educators,” said DeStefano. “Technology is one of the ways to do that.”

This frustration caused DeStefano to start Law Without Walls, a multidisciplinary think tank consisting of over 750 lawyers, law and business students, entrepreneurs and business professionals.

To that end, DeStefano told the lawyers in attendance that if they were just as frustrated as she had been, then they should channel that frustration into something positive. She pointed out that the legal industry was rapidly changing and cited AngelList figures that show that the number of companies identified as “legal tech companies” jumped from 15 in 2009 to 305 in 2013 to over a thousand last year.

“We’re seeing tons of money coming into our world,” said DeStefano. “But it means big changes.”

For DeStefano, that means there will be more collaboration between lawyers and nonlawyers, including accountants, business professionals and marketers. “The research proves that more diverse teams are more creative problem solvers,” she said. “We will have to learn to work with different types of professionals because that’s how our clients solve problems and they’ll want us to solve them the same way.”

Of course, getting to that point will be a tremendous hurdle, one that Abadin seemed well aware of. Answering a question, Abadin detailed the crux of the argument against paralegals being more involved in doing legal work.

“Lawyers don’t want this,” Abadin said. “The argument goes: ‘paralegals take away our business.’ ” And, after spearheading change within his own state, Abadin encouraged the lawyers in attendance to go to their state bar heads and demand greater awareness of legal technology.

“That’s the best way to bring about change,” he said. “It needs to bubble up.”