

## Business & Careers

# Hangout needs only computer, Internet connection

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Law firm partners Natalie MacDonald and Stuart Rudner resembled news anchors as they tackled the topic of employee sick notes, a matter that had recently been featured in mainstream news reports.

Their venue wasn't television, though. The principals of employment law boutique Rudner MacDonald hosted a Google+ Hangout on Air, which people can use to broadcast live events using a laptop and an Internet connection.

Hangouts on Air differ from Hangouts in the same way that webinars differ from videoconferences. Presenters control the show, but they don't see attendees. Questions are the only feedback they get from viewers.

Their first Hangout on Air attracted eight people, while their second (in which attendees outnumbered registrants) drew between 60 and 80 viewers.

The partners had a list of registrants, but not of actual attendees. This lack of information doesn't bother them.

"It allows people to tune in at the last minute if they choose," Rudner says of the open nature of Hangouts on Air. "It offers a potentially larger audience."

MacDonald, who describes herself as



Rudner

"tech-willing," likes the easy setup as well as the fact that the Hangout on Air was automatically recorded. A video of the Hangout on Air found its way onto the firm's YouTube channel later the same day, after some minor editing.

The video is now part of the firm's library. "We can use these types of things when we teach or when we do conferences," MacDonald says.

The partners write their own content. "You want to make it issue-oriented," MacDonald says. "That has helped us structure each Hangout. I think people ask more questions when it's focused, and they feel more comfortable when others ask questions they want to raise. They will then raise the next question."

Tuning in to the Hangout on Air required a visit to Rudner MacDonald's

Google+ page and a click on the Google Hangout notice posted there. The software did the rest.

The Hangout on Air proved surprisingly susceptible to actions like resizing the window that contains it. Should a viewer lose the video feed because of such an action, it's easy enough to reconnect by clicking the above-mentioned Hangout notice.

Attendees typed their questions in the uncomplicated Hangout on Air window. Other attendees who wanted to ask the same question had only to click the "+1" next to the question.

Rudner says they ran the Hangout on Air using his Lenovo ThinkPad X1 Carbon and nothing else. The notebook's internal camera and microphone provided acceptable broadcast quality. Their "studio" (Rudner's office) afforded adequate soundproofing and lighting for the broadcast, plus a simple background for the co-hosts. They connected to the Internet using Wi-Fi. The whole show came off without a technical glitch.

"We put the camera at the appropriate location (for it to show both of them), but that didn't let us read the questions easily," Rudner says. He wants a much bigger screen or a second screen closer to them so they won't have to lean forward and, in MacDonald's case, don her glasses to read the questions (Rudner wears his glasses throughout the Hangout on Air). They'll eliminate this issue in the office they're moving to. Questions should be more legible on a large-screen TV in the boardroom.

A Hangout on Air offers far fewer viewer tools than competing products. For instance, the questions that appeared on Rudner's Lenovo also showed on every body else's screens. The question box

doesn't allow participants to "see" the names of other participants, much less direct questions to specific audience members or the organizers. This design might not make sense in a videoconference, but it suited an educational event well. (A Google+ Hangout — not on Air — enables greater participation thanks to meeting tools like screen-sharing and audio and video for every participant.)

Not speaking to a live audience has its drawbacks. MacDonald handles questions and answers during live conferences, where she watches for cues like eye contact, facial expression and body language. "You can determine whether they understand or they need further information," she says.

Rudner, however, notes what might be called a "reverse webinar" effect at today's live conferences. "Now, more than half the audience tends to attend by webcast," he says.

It's one of many changes both lawyers take in stride as they continue to present at live conferences, teach, write articles, be interviewed for same, and now, host Hangouts on Air. We "started Rudner MacDonald" to be a source of education for people," says MacDonald, explaining that it's part of their vision to teach both employees and employers about their rights and entitlements.

"We offer half an hour of our time, for free, to allow people to ask us their burning questions." She adds that they keep track of issues like the medical notes story to answer questions and clear up misconceptions.

Neither partner denies the desire for a return on their investment of time, but they're sanguine about this marketing initiative.

"You don't get immediate results," Rudner says. "It's a long-term process, but if you invest the time, you will get the result."

## Growth: Build systems to weather issues

Continued from page 23

Research tells us rather convincingly that most new businesses underestimate the complexity that comes with growth, fail to adequately identify and evaluate all of the options and risks, and overestimate the hold they have on their customer base. A recent study from management consulting firm Bain, for example, noted that 80 percent of executives said their company's products were superior to their competitors' even though only eight percent of their customers agreed.

These cognitive biases are compounded internally by managerial group-think and a fear of robustly questioning the new business leader. Very few start-up organizations put in place an agreed-upon process for challenging and reconsidering their strategic priorities—in a survey of 500 executives, fewer than 10 indicated that such a mechanism for sober analysis was in place within their own organization.

So, as the leader of a law firm, what can you do to lessen the risk of creating a strategy that is destined to fail? Here are some suggestions:

- Institutionalize healthy skepticism in your managerial ranks and legitimize the role of devil's advocate.
- Before you even begin, decide how you will decide—determine the critical criteria and the framework that will govern

the strategic-thinking process and the outcomes.

- Ask yourself if you would do what you are proposing to do if your (and your family's) own money were at stake—this usually makes one think twice about overly risky initiatives;

- Develop contingency plans for the worst-case scenarios—a realistic assessment of key assumptions and risk factors will prove quite sobering; and

Given that the proposed new business strategy contains oversight mechanisms and incentives for monitoring feedback (like customer and employee surveys) that might prove useful in making mid-course adjustments.

At the root of every failed business plan or strategy is a set of assumptions about the future that proved false. You can't predict the future, so don't even try. Rather, seek to build a healthy, resilient enterprise by building in mechanisms, rules and systems that can withstand the inevitable stresses to your business. Then regularly revisit your priorities and reorder the agenda accordingly.

**Jim Murray is the architect of The CEO Program: Leading with Purpose, an advanced, intensive program open to any executive this May. For complete details, consult the CPO website: [www.cpoartia.com/CEOPD](http://www.cpoartia.com/CEOPD) or [www.SmartLeaders.ca](http://www.SmartLeaders.ca).**

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