

PROFESSIONAL INDEPENDENCE OF A LAWYER

(a) A lawyer or law firm shall not share legal fees with a nonlawyer, except that:

(1) an agreement by a lawyer with the lawyer's firm, partner, or associate may provide for the payment of money, over a reasonable period of time after the lawyer's death, to the lawyer's estate or to one or more specified persons;

(2) a lawyer who purchases the practice of a deceased, disabled, or disappeared lawyer may, pursuant to the provisions of Rule 1.17, pay to the estate or other representative of that lawyer the agreed-upon purchase price;

(3) a lawyer or law firm may include nonlawyer employees in a compensation or retirement plan, even though the plan is based in whole or in part on a profit-sharing arrangement; and

(4) [Reserved.]

(5) a lawyer authorized to complete unfinished legal business of a deceased lawyer may pay to the estate or other representative of the deceased lawyer that proportion of the total compensation that fairly represents the services rendered by the deceased lawyer.

(b) A lawyer shall not form a partnership with a nonlawyer if any of the activities of the partnership consist of the practice of law.

(c) A lawyer shall not permit a person who recommends, employs, or pays the lawyer to render legal services for another to direct or regulate the lawyer's professional judgment in rendering such legal services.

(d) A lawyer shall not practice with or in the form of a professional corporation or association authorized to practice law for a profit, if:

(1) a nonlawyer owns any interest therein, except that a fiduciary representative of the estate of a lawyer may hold the stock or interest of the lawyer for a reasonable time during administration;

(2) a nonlawyer is a corporate director or officer (other than as secretary or treasurer) thereof or occupies the position of similar responsibility in any form of association other than a corporation; or

(3) a nonlawyer has the right to direct or control the professional judgment of a lawyer.

[Adopted effective September 1, 1985; Amended effective September, 1, 2006.]

Comments

[1] The provisions of this Rule express traditional limitations on sharing fees. These limitations are to protect the lawyer's professional independence of judgment. Where someone other than the client pays the lawyer's fee or salary, or recommends employment of the lawyer, that arrangement does not modify the lawyer's obligation to the client. As stated in paragraph (c), such arrangements should not interfere with the lawyer's professional judgment.

[2] This Rule also expresses traditional limitations on permitting a third party to direct or regulate the lawyer's professional judgment in rendering legal services to another. See also Rule 1.8(f) (lawyer may accept compensation from a third party as long as there is no interference with the lawyer's independent professional judgment and the client gives informed consent).

Additional Washington Comments (3-5)

[3] Paragraph (a)(5) was taken from former Washington RPC 5.4(a)(2).

[4] Notwithstanding Rule 5.4, lawyers and LLLTs may share fees and form business structures to the extent permitted by Rule 5.9.

[Comment 4 adopted effective April 14, 2015.]

[5] Notwithstanding Rule 5.4, there are circumstances when a lawyer can share a fee with a not-for-profit lawyer referral service. See Rule 7.3(b)(2) and Comment 15.

[Comment 5 adopted effective April 29, 2025.]

[Comments adopted effective September 1, 2006.]