

Study Groups

GUIDELINES

What is a study group?

A study group is organised for the purpose of discussing information and concepts related to your practice area with a small group of other lawyers. Study group participants may be lawyers from a variety of settings – sole and small firm lawyers from your area, lawyers who practise in the same area of law, or lawyers in the same firm, legal department or government agency. It is recommended that a facilitator, internal or external to the group, lead the discussion [*a facilitator's guide will be developed*].

Participating in study groups gives you the opportunity to have interactive peer-to-peer discussion, to share your experiences and to learn from others. It can be a challenge to keep up to date on changes to the law as well as the diversity and changing needs of clients. Study groups are a way of keeping up in a flexible and cost-efficient manner.

Why organise a study group?

It is generally recognised that people can accomplish and learn more by sharing their skills and resources than by working alone. Interacting and exchanging ideas with others can enhance your knowledge of legal issues. Organising a study group can help you and your colleagues

- Sharpen your communication skills
- Benefit from a wide range of experience and knowledge
- Analyse issues from several different angles
- Obtain feedback on your ideas and thoughts
- Gain insight into how other people work and think

Can participation in a study group be included in your CPD plan as a CPD activity?

If a study group is planned and structured, with a stated purpose and outcomes, is not file specific, and is relevant to your identified learning needs, you may include it in your CPD plan as a CPD activity. Study group facilitators may claim a reasonable amount of CPD time for the time they spend in preparation.

Who should participate in a study group?

Study groups work best when there are four or five members per facilitator. It is recommended that participants are at the same level of experience and practise in the same area of law. Ideally they will be from the same geographical area, but lawyers

practising in isolated communities or in a highly specialised area of the law may find it worthwhile to meet online or via a video or teleconferencing facility. Cooperation among group members and a willingness to be an active group participant are required in order for the study group to be successful.

In many cases you will be able to use your informal contacts to set up a study group. If not, your local Law Society branch manager may be able to assist you in contacting colleagues in your practice area. Advertisements for your study group can be placed in your local law library or in your branch newsletter if you have one. You could also contact the *LawTalk* editor about putting a note in *LawTalk*.

Facilitating the study group

You will need to choose a facilitator for each of your topics. The facilitator, internal or external to your group, takes the role of the session leader to keep the discussion on track and productive. Facilitators are responsible for

- Introducing the topic
- Creating an open forum for discussion
- Leading and encouraging discussion
- Asking open-ended questions to stimulate thought
- Making sure everyone has an opportunity to participate
- Reinforcing and clarifying the content
- Review and summary

What should be discussed at the study group?

Limit your topics to two per hour. This allows time for introduction of the topic, a 25-minute discussion and a wrap-up of each issue. You can find discussion points for your study group by

- Asking other lawyers in your area of law for topics
- Reviewing legal newsletters, magazines and law journals
- Looking for CPD calendars or websites in your area of law and reviewing the topics listed in the programme agendas.

CLE providers, for example, NZLS CLE Ltd, may have special packages based on previous courses which could be helpful or you might develop your own materials based on courses or parts of courses you have attended.

What makes a study group successful?

- Each member of the study group contributes to the discussion
- Only one member of the group speaks at a time and the others actively listen
- Members are prompt and come prepared
- The study group stays on topic
- Members are free to ask questions and provide constructive criticism

Where and when should the study group session take place?

You should select a meeting place that is free from distractions. The group could meet in the local law library. Some Law Society branches have meeting rooms available; otherwise a member may have access to a meeting room or library in their own organisation which the group could use, especially if meetings are planned well in advance. Study groups work best in a relaxed environment where participants meet face-to-face to talk about issues. Study groups may work well combined with a BYO lunch.

How long should the study group session be?

It is recommended that your study group session be one or two hours in length, depending on the number of topics to be discussed. No more than two topics should be scheduled per hour. It is important to stick to the ending time.

Follow-up?

Take a few minutes at the end of the study group to review what has been discussed, to identify the learning outcomes and to encourage participants to identify what they will do differently as a result of participating in the discussion. Remind them to record their reflections in their CPD

plans, or, better still, they could do this on the spot. Some participants may also wish to volunteer to set up another study group meeting at this time.

Records and verification

Your attendance at CPD activities must be documented. You could head up a piece of paper with the relevant details, sign it yourself and ask the facilitator or another participant to add their name and signature.

Alternatively the facilitator or a study group member could do this for the entire group. Participants could fill in a list of names and signatures which could then be scanned and emailed or copied on the spot and distributed to participants.

(Adapted from material prepared by the Law Society of Upper Canada with the kind permission of that society)