

Judicial Profile:

In the Midst of Change, Judge Wadel Puts Employees First So They Can Put Customers First

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In the marathon of reengineering a court, Judge Peter J. Wadel has become a “cross-trainer.”

Since taking the reins six years ago as Chief Judge of Mason County Trial Courts (51st Circuit Court, 79th District Court, Mason County Probate Court), Judge Wadel has trained his team—and himself—to multitask.

“Following election in 2003 as district judge, I directed my court administrator to institute a cross-training program in the district court,” he explained. “With the election of a new probate judge (three years ago) and a new circuit judge (one year ago), we are expanding the concept within each court and eventually across all the courts. This, to us, is a logical direction since we received approval for our concurrent jurisdiction plan.”

Judge Wadel added, “We cross-train all of our employees so that they can move the cases through without delay. We are a small court system, so we don’t have the luxury of having excess people to step in when someone is on vacation or out sick. We have to cross-train to make sure our caseload does not get stagnant.”

Judge Wadel, who earned his law degree from the University of Notre Dame, says that there are also certain times of the year when the courts have traditionally had a higher volume of filings. During these times, cross-trained employees have been helpful in assisting the clerk and moving the caseload along to ensure no one gets overloaded or slowed down.

But there are challenges to doing this, he says.

“Reengineering is a constant change process, and there is discomfort in this for staff,” he remarked. “We try to make sure the change makes sense and bring staff along in reasonable timeframes to make the changes easier on them to implement. Everything is geared toward their speed and comfort because then they can be better equipped to help the public.”



Judge Peter Wadel



Mason County Courthouse in Ludington

In addition to the cross-training that the Mason County Trial Courts have undergone, a concurrent jurisdiction plan was approved by the Michigan Supreme Court's State Court Administrative Office (SCAO) in October 2015, and took effect January 1, 2016.

Judge Wadel says that as a result of the plan, there is more flexibility in moving judges where they are needed and in combining other functions. The court will merge the magistrate function with the referee function in the family court to have a combined attorney referee and magistrate. In addition, they also are working toward having a single individual who will serve as a court administrator across all the courts.

Some of the major technology improvements the court has made include equipping staff with computers to reduce the amount of paperwork, bringing videoconferencing into the courtrooms, using digital recording, and updating telephone conferencing equipment.

So how has Judge Wadel been able to steer this reengineering process?

"The things that make these changes work and help me do a better job are the work of fellow judges who have been changing their own courts, state court programs especially those offered through SCAO and MJI, and exchanging information with other courts," Judge Wadel said. "I have learned from people who have gone out and tried new things and I try to 'cherry-pick' the best practices that fit our court size. I also work with my fellow judges in this community and around the state through the Internet."

In addition, he points to patience and preparation as two key qualities that he calls on to lead the Mason County Trial Courts through this period of transition, not to mention qualities that regularly help him in the courtroom.

"Whether it is a litigant or an employee, everyone needs to be heard," he shared. "Also, preparation and being ready to deal with what comes at you is essential. You need to study the issues, and do a lot of research ahead of time. That is how we are dealing with the reengineering—preparing for what we need and taking steps to get there."

Judge Wadel says that some of the payoffs of the changes include court employees who are better equipped to do their jobs, which makes them more comfortable, and judges who are working together more directly than they ever have before. "Until recently the individual courts worked in silos. Now we are working as a team and meeting regularly. We are addressing court administrative issues together, and we have a greater collegiality than we have ever had," he noted.

As for future goals, Judge Wadel cannot run for re-election and his position will not be re-filled, so the court is preparing for that by putting together a structure for two judges to handle the load after he leaves and involving the whole staff in giving input. He also eventually wants to bring in electronic case management and e-filing, and talks about looking to SCAO for new, better, and best practices.

"The bottom line is that our customers and our employees benefit from having certainty. Giving people certainty, even if it's something they don't like, lets them get on with their lives," he shared.

An avid outdoorsman, Judge Wadel enjoys hunting and fly fishing in his free time, and jokes that November 15 is a "holy day of obligation." He considers fly fishing a calming influence that helps him attain balance. He and his wife of 33 years, Ingrid, have four grown children.