

**THE STATE BAR OF CALIFORNIA  
STANDING COMMITTEE ON  
PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND CONDUCT  
FORMAL OPINION ~~INTERIM~~ NO. 11-00042015-193**

**ISSUE:** What are an attorney's ethical duties in the handling of discovery of electronically stored information?

**DIGEST:** An attorney's obligations under the ethical duty of competence evolve as new technologies develop and become integrated with the practice of law. Attorney competence related to litigation generally requires, among other things, and at a minimum, a basic understanding of, and facility with, issues relating to e-discovery, including the discovery of electronically stored information ("ESI"). On a case-by-case basis, the duty of competence may require a higher level of technical knowledge and ability, depending on the e-discovery issues involved in a matter, and the nature of the ESI. Competency may require even a highly experienced attorney to seek assistance in some litigation matters involving ESI. An attorney lacking the required competence for e-discovery issues has three options: (1) acquire sufficient learning and skill before performance is required; (2) associate with or consult technical consultants or competent counsel; or (3) decline the client representation. Lack of competence in e-discovery issues also may lead to an ethical violation of an attorney's duty of confidentiality.

**AUTHORITIES**

**INTERPRETED:** Rules 3-100 and 3-110 of the Rules of Professional Conduct of the State Bar of California.<sup>1/</sup>

Business and Professions Code section 6068(e).

[Evidence Code sections 952, 954 and 955.](#)

**STATEMENT OF FACTS**

Attorney defends Client in litigation brought by Client's Chief Competitor in a judicial district that mandates consideration of e-discovery<sup>2/</sup> issues in its formal case management order, which is consistent with California Rules of Court, rule 3.728. Opposing Counsel demands e-discovery; Attorney refuses. They are unable to reach an agreement by the time of the initial case management conference. At that conference, an annoyed Judge informs both attorneys they have had ample prior notice that e-discovery would be addressed at the conference and tells them to return in two hours with a joint proposal.

In the ensuing meeting between the two lawyers, Opposing Counsel suggests a joint search of Client's network, using Opposing Counsel's chosen vendor, based upon a jointly agreed search term list. She offers a clawback agreement that would permit Client to claw back any inadvertently produced ESI that is protected by the attorney-client privilege and/or the work product doctrine ("Privileged ESI").

~~Attorney believes the clawback agreement will allow him to pull back anything he "inadvertently" produces. Attorney concludes that Opposing Counsel's proposal is acceptable and, after advising Client about the terms and obtaining Client's authority, agrees to Opposing Counsel's proposal. The Judge thereafter approves the attorneys'~~

---

<sup>1/</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all references to rules in this opinion will be to the Rules of Professional Conduct of the State Bar of California.

<sup>2/</sup> Electronically ~~Stored Information~~stored information ("ESI") is information that is stored in technology having electrical, digital, magnetic, wireless, optical, electromagnetic, or similar capabilities (e.g., Code Civ. Proc., § 2016.020, sub. (d) – (e)). Electronic Discovery, also known as e-discovery, is the use of legal means to obtain ESI in the course of litigation for evidentiary purposes.

Attorney believes the clawback agreement will allow him to pull back anything he “inadvertently” produces. Attorney concludes that Opposing Counsel’s proposal is acceptable and, after advising Client about the terms and obtaining Client’s authority, agrees to Opposing Counsel’s proposal. Judge thereafter approves the attorneys’ joint agreement and incorporates it into a Case Management Order, including the provision for the clawback of Privileged ESI. The Court sets a deadline three months later for the network search to occur.

Back in his office, Attorney prepares a list of keywords he thinks would be relevant to the case, and provides them to Opposing Counsel as Client’s agreed upon search terms. Attorney reviews Opposing Counsel’s additional proposed search terms, which on their face appear to be neutral and not advantageous to one party or the other, and agrees that they may be included.

Attorney has represented Client before, and knows Client is a large company with an information technology (“IT”) department. Client’s CEO tells Attorney there is no electronic information it has not already provided to Attorney in hard copy form. Attorney ~~also~~ assumes that the IT department understands network searches better than he does and, relying on that assumption and the information provided by CEO, concludes it is unnecessary to do anything further beyond instructing Client to provide Vendor direct access to its network on the agreed upon search date. Attorney takes no further action to review the available data or to instruct Client or its IT staff about the search or discovery. As directed by Attorney, Client gives ~~vendor~~ Vendor unsupervised direct access to its network to run the search using the search terms.

Subsequently, Attorney receives an electronic copy of the data retrieved by Vendor’s search and, busy with other matters, saves it in an electronic file without review. He believes that the data will match the hard copy documents provided by Client that he already has reviewed, based on Client’s CEO’s representation that all information has already been provided to Attorney.

A few weeks later, Attorney receives a letter from Opposing Counsel accusing Client of destroying evidence and/or spoliation. Opposing Counsel threatens motions for monetary and evidentiary sanctions. After Attorney receives this letter, he unsuccessfully attempts to open his electronic copy of the data retrieved by Vendor’s search. Attorney finally hires an e-discovery expert (“Expert”), who accesses the data, conducts a forensic search, and tells Attorney potentially responsive ESI has been routinely deleted from ~~the~~ Client’s computers as part of Client’s normal document retention policy, resulting in gaps in the document production. Expert also advises Attorney that, due to the breadth of Vendor’s execution of the jointly agreed search terms, both privileged information, ~~as well as and~~ irrelevant but highly proprietary information about Client’s upcoming revolutionary product, ~~was were~~ provided to Plaintiff Chief Competitor in the data retrieval. Expert advises Attorney that an ~~experienced~~ IT professional with litigation experience likely would have recognized the overbreadth of the search and prevented the retrieval of the proprietary information.

What ethical issues face Attorney relating to the e-discovery issues in this hypothetical?

## DISCUSSION

### I. Duty of Competence

#### A. **Did Attorney Violate The Duty of Competence Arising From His Own Acts/Omissions?**

While e-discovery may be relatively new to the legal profession, an attorney’s core ethical duty of competence remains constant. Rule 3-110(A) provides: “A member shall not intentionally, recklessly, or repeatedly fail to perform legal services with competence.” Under subdivision (B) of that rule, “competence” in legal services shall mean to apply the diligence, learning and skill, and mental, emotional, and physical ability reasonably necessary for the performance of such service. Read together, a mere failure to act competently does not trigger discipline under rule 3-110. Rather, it is the failure to do so in a manner that is intentional, reckless or repeated that would result in a disciplinable rule 3-110 violation. (See, *In the Matter of Torres* (Rev-Review Dept. 2000) 4 Cal. State Bar Ct. Rptr. 138, 149 (“We have repeatedly held that negligent legal representation, even that amounting to legal malpractice, does not establish a [competence] rule 3-110(A) violation.”); see also, *In the Matter of Gadda* (Review Dept. 2002) 4 Cal. State Bar Ct. Rptr. 416 (reckless and repeated acts); *In the Matter of Riordan* (Review Dept. 2007) 5 Cal. State Bar Ct. Rptr. 41 (reckless and repeated acts); ).)

Legal rules and procedures, when placed alongside ever-changing technology, produce professional challenges that attorneys must meet to remain competent. Maintaining learning and skill consistent with an attorney's duty of competence includes "keeping abreast of changes in the law and its practice, including the benefits and risks associated with relevant technology, . . ." ABA Model Rule 1.1, Comment [8],<sup>3/</sup> Rule 3-110(C) provides: "If a member does not have sufficient learning and skill when the legal service is undertaken, the member may nonetheless perform such services competently by 1) associating with or, where appropriate, professionally consulting another lawyer reasonably believed to be competent, or 2) by acquiring sufficient learning and skill ~~before performance is~~ before performance is required." Another permissible choice would be to decline the representation. When e-discovery is at issue, association or consultation may be with a non-lawyer technical expert, if appropriate in the circumstances. Cal. State Bar Formal Opn. No. 2010-179.

Not every litigated case involves e-discovery. Yet, in today's technological world, almost every litigation matter *potentially* does. The chances are significant that a party or a witness has used email or other electronic ~~communications~~communication, stores information digitally, and/or has other forms of ESI related to the dispute. The law governing e-discovery is still evolving. In 2009, the California Legislature passed California's Electronic Discovery Act adding or amending several California discovery statutes to make provisions for electronic discovery. See, e.g., Code of Civil Procedure section 2031.010, paragraph (a) (expressly providing for "copying, testing, or sampling" of "electronically stored information in the possession, custody, or control of any other party to the action.")<sup>4/</sup> However, there is little California case law interpreting the Electronic Discovery Act, and much of the development of e-discovery law continues to occur in the federal arena. Thus, to analyze a California attorney's current ethical obligations relating to e-discovery, we look to the federal jurisprudence for guidance, as well as applicable Model Rules, and apply those ~~principals~~principles based upon California's ethical rules and existing discovery law.<sup>5/</sup>

We start with the premise that "competent" handling of e-discovery has many dimensions, depending upon the complexity of e-discovery in a particular case. The ethical duty of competence requires an attorney to assess at the outset of each case what electronic discovery issues might arise during the litigation, including the likelihood that e-discovery will or should be sought by either side. If e-discovery will probably be sought, the duty of competence requires an attorney to assess his or her own e-discovery skills and resources as part of the attorney's duty to provide the client with competent representation. If an attorney lacks such skills and/or resources, the attorney must try to acquire sufficient learning and skill, or associate or consult with someone with expertise to assist. Rule 3-110(C). Attorneys handling e-discovery should be able to perform (either by themselves or in association with competent co-counsel or expert consultants) the following:

- initially assess e-discovery needs and issues, if any;
- implement/cause to implement appropriate ESI preservation procedures;<sup>6/</sup>

---

<sup>3/</sup> ~~In the absence of on-point California authority and conflicting state public policy, the ABA Model Rules may provide guidance. *City & County of San Francisco v. Cobra Solutions, Inc.* (2006) 38 Cal.4th 839,852 [43 Cal.Rptr.3d 771].~~

<sup>3/</sup> Although not binding, opinions of ethics committees in California should be consulted by members for guidance on proper professional conduct. Ethics opinions and rules and standards promulgated by other jurisdictions and bar associations may also be considered. Rule 1-100(A).

<sup>4/</sup> In 2006, revisions were made to the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, rules 16, 26, 33, 34, 37 and 45, to address e-discovery issues in federal litigation. California modeled its Electronic Discovery Act to conform with mostly-parallel provisions in those 2006 federal rules amendments. (See Evans, *Analysis of the Assembly Committee on Judiciary regarding AB 5, March 3, (2009)*. ([http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/09-10/bill/asm/ab\\_0001-0050/ab\\_5\\_cfa\\_20090302\\_114942\\_asm\\_comm.html](http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/09-10/bill/asm/ab_0001-0050/ab_5_cfa_20090302_114942_asm_comm.html))-[http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/09-10/bill/asm/ab\\_0001-0050/ab\\_5\\_cfa\\_20090302\\_114942\\_asm\\_comm.html](http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/09-10/bill/asm/ab_0001-0050/ab_5_cfa_20090302_114942_asm_comm.html).)

<sup>5/</sup> Federal decisions are compelling where the California law is based upon a federal statute or the federal rules. (See *Toshiba America Electronic Components, Inc. v. Superior Court (Lexar Media, Inc.)* (2004) 124 Cal.App.4th 762, 770 [21 Cal.Rptr.3d 532]; *Vasquez v. Cal. School of Culinary Arts, Inc.* (2014) 230 Cal.App.4th 35 [178 Cal.Rptr.3d 10]; see also footnote 4, *supra*.)

<sup>6/</sup> This opinion does not directly address ethical obligations relating to litigation holds. A litigation hold is a directive issued to, by, or on behalf of a client to persons or entities associated with the client who may possess potentially

relevant documents (including ESI) that directs those custodians to preserve such documents, pending further direction. See generally Redgrave, *Sedona Conference*® *Commentary on Legal Holds: The Trigger and The Process* (Fall 2010) *The Sedona Conference Journal*, Vol. 11 at pp. 260 – 270, 277 – 279. Prompt issuance of a litigation hold may prevent spoliation of evidence, and the duty to do so falls on both the party and outside counsel working on the matter. See

- analyze and understand a client's ESI systems and storage;
- ~~identify custodians of relevant ESI;~~
- ~~perform data searches;~~
- ~~collect responsive ESI in a manner that preserves the integrity of that ESI;~~
- advise the client on available options for collection and preservation of ESI;
- ~~identify custodians of potentially relevant ESI;~~
- engage in competent and meaningful meet and confer with opposing counsel concerning an e-discovery plan; ~~and~~
- ~~perform data searches;~~
- ~~collect responsive ESI in a manner that preserves the integrity of that ESI; and~~
- produce responsive non-privileged ESI in a recognized and appropriate manner.<sup>7/ 7/</sup>

See, e.g., *Pension Committee of the University of Montreal Pension Plan v. Banc of America Securities, LLC* (S.D.N.Y. 2010) 685 F.Supp.2d 456, 462 – 465 (defining gross negligence in the preservation of ESI), (abrogated on other grounds in *Chin v. Port Authority* (2nd Cir. 2012) 685 F.3d 135 (failure to institute litigation hold did not constitute gross negligence per se)).

In our hypothetical, Attorney had a general obligation to make an e-discovery evaluation early, prior to the initial case management conference. ~~That~~The fact that it was the standard practice of the judicial district in which the case was pending to address e-discovery issues in formal case management highlighted Attorney's obligation to conduct an early initial e-discovery evaluation.

Notwithstanding this obligation, Attorney made *no* assessment of the case's e-discovery needs or of his own capabilities. Attorney exacerbated the situation by not consulting with another attorney or an e-discovery expert prior to agreeing to an e-discovery plan at the initial case management conference. He then allowed that proposal to become a court order, again with no expert consultation, although he lacked sufficient expertise. Attorney participated in preparing joint e-discovery search terms without experience or expert consultation, and he did not recognizefully understand the danger of overbreadth in the agreed upon search terms.

Even after Attorney stipulated to a court order directing a search of Client's network, Attorney took no action other than to instruct Client to allow Vendor to have access to Client's network. Attorney did not instruct or supervise Client regarding the direct network search or discovery, nor did he try to pre-test the agreed upon search terms or otherwise review the data before the network search, relying on his assumption that Client's IT department would know what to do, and on the parties' clawback agreement.

After the search, busy with other matters and under the impression the data matched the hard copy documents he had already seen, Attorney took no action to review the gathered data until after Opposing Counsel asserted spoliation and threatened sanctions. Attorney then unsuccessfully attempted to review the search results. It was only then, at the end of this long line of events, that Attorney finally consulted an e-discovery expert and learned of the e-discovery problems facing Client. By this point, the potential prejudice facing Client was significant, and much of the damage already had been done.

At the least, Attorney risked breaching his duty of competence when he failed at the outset of the case to perform a timely e-discovery evaluation. Once Opposing Counsel insisted on the exchange of e-discovery, it became certain that e-discovery would be implicated, and the risk of a breach of the duty of competence grew considerably; this should have prompted Attorney to take additional steps to obtain competence, as contemplated under rule 3-110(C), such as consulting an e-discovery expert.

---

[Footnote ~~continued~~Continued...]

*Zubulake v. UBS Warburg, LLC* (S.D.N.Y. 2003) 220 F.R.D. 212, 218 and *Zubulake v. UBS Warburg, LLC* (S.D.N.Y. 2004) 229 F.R.D. 422, 432. Spoliation of evidence can result in significant sanctions, including monetary and/or evidentiary sanctions, which may impact a client's case significantly.

<sup>7/</sup> This opinion focuses on an attorney's ethical obligations relating to his own client's ESI; and, therefore, this list focuses on those issues. This opinion does not address the scope of an attorney's duty of competence relating to obtaining an opposing party's ESI.

Had the e-discovery expert been consulted at the beginning, or at the latest once Attorney realized e-discovery would be required, the expert could have taken various steps to protect Client's interest, including possibly helping to structure the search differently, or drafting search terms less likely to turn over privileged and/or irrelevant but highly proprietary material. An expert also could have assisted Attorney in his duty to counsel Client of the significant ~~danger~~risks in allowing a third party unsupervised direct access to Client's system due to the high risks, ~~including the high potential for violation of trade secrets~~, and how to mitigate those risks. An expert also could have supervised the data collection by Vendor.<sup>8/</sup>

Whether Attorney's acts/omissions in this single case amount to a disciplinable offense under the "intentionally, recklessly, or repeatedly" standard of rule 3-110 is beyond this opinion, yet such a finding could be implicated by these facts.<sup>9/</sup> (See, e.g., *In the Matter of Respondent G.* (Review Dept. 1992) 2 Cal. State Bar Ct. Rptr. 175, 179 (respondent did not perform competently where he was reminded on repeated occasions of inheritance taxes owed and repeatedly failed to advise his clients of them); *In re Matter of Copren* (Review Dept. 2005) 4 Cal. State Bar Ct. Rptr. 861, 864 (respondent did not perform competently when he failed to take several acts in single bankruptcy matter); *In re Matter of Layton* (Review Dept. 1993) 2 Cal. State Bar Ct. Rptr. 366, 377-378 (respondent did not perform competently where he "recklessly" exceeded time to administer estate, failed to diligently sell/distribute real property, untimely settled supplemental accounting and did not notify beneficiaries of intentions not to sell/lease property).

## **B. Did Attorney Violate The Duty of Competence By Failing To Supervise?**

The duty of competence in rule 3-110 includes the duty to supervise the work of subordinate attorneys and non-attorney employees or agents. See Discussion to rule 3-110. This duty to supervise can extend to outside vendors or contractors, and even to the client itself. See California State Bar Formal [Opinion Opn.](#) No. 2004-165 (duty to supervise outside contract lawyers); San Diego County Bar Association Formal Opn. No. 2012-1 (duty to supervise clients relating to ESI, citing *Cardenas v. Dorel Juvenile Group, Inc.* (D. Kan. 2006) 2006 WL 1537394).

Rule 3-110(C) permits an attorney to meet the duty of competence through association [with another lawyer](#) or consultation with an expert, ~~including a non-lawyer technical expert.~~ See [Cal-California](#) State Bar Formal Opn. No. 2010-179. Such expert may be an outside vendor, a subordinate attorney, or even the client, if they possess the necessary expertise. This consultation or association, however, does not absolve an attorney's obligation to supervise the work of the expert under rule 3-110, which is a non-delegable duty belonging to the attorney who is counsel in the litigation, and who remains the one primarily answerable to the court. An attorney must maintain overall responsibility for the work of the expert he or she chooses, even if that expert is the client or someone employed by the client. The attorney must do so by remaining regularly engaged in the expert's work, by educating everyone involved in the e-discovery workup about the legal issues in the case, the factual matters impacting discovery, including witnesses and key evidentiary issues, the obligations around discovery imposed by the law or by the court, and of any relevant risks associated with the e-discovery tasks at hand. The attorney should issue appropriate instructions and guidance and, ultimately, conduct appropriate tests until satisfied that the attorney is meeting his ethical obligations prior to releasing ESI.

Here, relying on his familiarity with Client's IT department, Attorney assumed the department understood network searches better than he did. He gave them no further instructions other than to allow Vendor access on the date of [the network search.](#) [He provided them with no information regarding how discovery works in litigation, differences](#)

---

<sup>8/</sup> See Advisory Committee Notes to the 2006 Amendments to the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, rule 34 ("Inspection or testing of certain types of electronically stored information or of a responding party's electronic information system may raise issues of confidentiality or privacy. The addition of testing and sampling to Rule 34(a) . . . is not meant to create a routine right of direct access to a party's electronic information system, although such access might be justified in some circumstances. Courts should guard against undue intrusiveness resulting from inspecting or testing such systems."). See also The Sedona Principles Addressing Electronic Document Production (2nd Ed. 2007), Comment 10(b) ("Special issues may arise with any request to secure direct access to electronically stored information or to computer devices or systems on which it resides. Protective orders should be in place to guard against any release of proprietary, confidential, or personal electronically stored information accessible to the adversary or its expert.").

<sup>9/</sup> This opinion does not intend to set or ~~to~~ define a standard of care of attorneys for liability purposes, as standards of care can be highly dependent on the factual scenario and other factors not applicable to our analysis herein.

~~the network search. He provided them with no information regarding how discovery works in litigation, differences~~ between a party affiliated vendor and a neutral vendor, what could constitute waiver under the law, what case-specific issues were involved, or the applicable search terms. Client allowed Vendor direct access to its entire network, without the presence of any Client representative to observe or monitor Vendor's actions. Vendor retrieved proprietary trade secret and privileged information, a result Expert advised Attorney could have been prevented had a trained IT individual been involved from the outset. In addition, Attorney failed to warn Client of the potential significant legal effect of not suspending its routine document deletion protocol under its document retention program.

Here, as with Attorney's own actions/inactions, whether Attorney's reliance on Client was reasonable and sufficient to satisfy the duty to supervise in this setting is a question for a trier of fact. Again, however, a potential finding of a competence violation is implicated by the fact pattern. See, e.g., *Palomo v. State Bar* (1984) 36 Cal.3d 785, 796 [205 Cal.Rptr. 834] (evidence demonstrated lawyer's pervasive carelessness in failing to give the office manager any supervision, or ~~failing to instruct~~instruction on trust account requirements and procedures).

## **II. Duty of Confidentiality**

A fundamental duty of an attorney is "[t]o maintain inviolate the confidence, and at every peril to himself or herself to preserve the secrets, of his or her client." (Bus. & Prof. Code, § 6068 (e)(1).) "Secrets" includes "information, other than that protected by the attorney-client privilege, that the client has requested be held inviolate or the disclosure of which would be embarrassing or would be likely to be detrimental to the client." (Cal. State Bar Formal Opinion No. 1988-~~19696~~.) "A member shall not reveal information protected from disclosure by Business and Professions Code section 6068, subdivision (e)(1), without the informed consent of the client, or as provided in paragraph (B) of this rule." (Rule 3-100(A)-(C))

Similarly, an attorney has a duty to assert the attorney-client privilege to protect confidential communications between the attorney and client. (Evid. Code, §§ 952, 954, 955.) In civil discovery, the attorney-client privilege will protect confidential communications between the attorney and client in cases of inadvertent disclosure *only if* the attorney and client act reasonably to protect that privilege. See *Regents of University of California v. Superior Court (Aquila Merchant Services, Inc.)* (2008) 165 Cal.App.4th 672, 683 [81 Cal.Rptr.3d 186]. This approach also echoes federal law.<sup>10/</sup> A lack of reasonable care to protect against disclosing privileged and protected information when producing ESI can be deemed a waiver of the attorney-client privilege. See *Kilopass Tech. Inc. v. Sidense Corp.* (N.D. Cal. 2012) 2012 WL 1534065 at 2 – 3 (attorney-client privilege deemed waived as to privileged documents released through e-discovery because screening procedures employed were unreasonable).

In our hypothetical, because of the actions taken by Attorney prior to consulting with any e-discovery expert, Client's privileged information has been disclosed. Due to Attorney's actions, Chief Competitor can argue that such disclosures were not "inadvertent" and that any privileges were waived. Further, non-privileged, but highly confidential proprietary information about Client's upcoming revolutionary new product has been released into the hands of Chief Competitor. Even absent any indication that Opposing Counsel did anything to engineer the overbroad disclosure, it remains true that the disclosure occurred because Attorney participated in creating overbroad search terms. All of this happened unbeknownst to Attorney, and only came to light after Plaintiff Chief Competitor accused Client of evidence spoliation. Absent Plaintiff's Chief Competitor's accusation, it is not clear when any of this would have come to Attorney's attention, if ever.

The clawback agreement on which Attorney heavily relied ~~upon by Attorney~~ may not work to retrieve the information from the other side. By its terms, the clawback agreement was limited to inadvertently produced Privileged ESI. Both privileged information, and non-privileged, but confidential and proprietary information, have been released to Plaintiff Chief Competitor.

---

<sup>10/</sup> See Federal Rules of Evidence, rule 502(b): "Inadvertent Disclosure. When made in a federal proceeding or to a federal office or agency, the disclosure does not operate as a waiver in a federal or state proceeding if: (1) the disclosure is inadvertent; (2) the holder of the privilege or protection took reasonable steps to prevent disclosure; and (3) the holder promptly took reasonable steps to rectify the error, including (if applicable) following Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 26(b)(5)(B)."

Under these facts, Client may have to litigate whether Client (through Attorney) acted diligently enough to protect its attorney-client privileged communications. Attorney took no action to review Client's network prior to allowing the network search, did not instruct or supervise Client prior to or during Vendor's search, participated in drafting ~~of~~ the overbroad search terms, and waited until after Client was accused of evidence spoliation before reviewing the data – all of which could permit Opposing Counsel ~~to~~ viably to argue Client failed to exercise due care to protect the privilege, and the disclosure was not inadvertent.<sup>11/</sup>

Client also may have to litigate ~~further~~ its right to the return of non-privileged but confidential proprietary information, which was not addressed in the clawback agreement.

Whether a waiver has occurred under these circumstances, and what Client's rights are to return of its non-privileged/confidential proprietary information, again are legal questions beyond this opinion. Attorney did not reasonably try to minimize the risks. Even if Client can retrieve the information, Client may never “un-ring the bell.”

The State Bar Court Review Department has stated, “Section 6068, subdivision (e) is the most strongly worded duty binding on a California attorney. It requires the attorney to maintain ‘inviolable’ the confidence and ‘at every peril to himself or herself’ ~~to reserve~~ preserve the client’s secrets.” (See *Matter of Johnson* (Rev. Dept. 2000) 4 Cal. State Bar Ct. Rptr. 179~~).~~) While the law does not require perfection by attorneys in acting to protect privileged or confidential information, it requires the exercise of ~~some level of~~ reasonable care. Cal. State Bar Formal Opn. No. 2010-179. Here, Attorney took only minimal steps to protect Client's ESI, or to instruct/supervise Client in the gathering and production of that ESI, and instead released everything without prior review, inappropriately relying on a clawback agreement. Client's secrets are now in Plaintiff's Chief Competitor's hands, and further, Plaintiff Chief Competitor may claim that Client has waived the attorney-client privilege. Client has been exposed to that potential dispute as the direct result of Attorney's actions. Attorney may have breached his duty of confidentiality to Client.

## CONCLUSION

Electronic document creation and/or storage, and electronic communications, have become commonplace in modern life, and discovery of ESI is now a frequent part of almost any litigated matter. Attorneys who handle litigation may not ignore the requirements and obligations of electronic discovery. Depending on the factual circumstances, a lack of technological knowledge in handling e-discovery may render an attorney ethically incompetent to handle certain litigation matters involving e-discovery, absent curative assistance under rule 3-110(C), even where the attorney may otherwise be highly experienced. It also may result in violations of the duty of confidentiality, notwithstanding a lack of bad faith conduct.

This opinion is issued by the Standing Committee on Professional Responsibility and Conduct of the State Bar of California. It is advisory only. It is not binding upon the courts, the State Bar of California, its Board of Trustees, any persons or tribunals charged with regulatory responsibilities, or any member of the State Bar.

[\[Publisher's Note: Internet resources cited in this opinion were last accessed by staff on June 30, 2015. Copies of these resources are on file with the State Bar's Office of Professional Competence.\]](#)

---

<sup>11/</sup> Although statute, rules, and/or case law provide some limited authority for the legal claw back of certain inadvertently produced materials, even in the absence of an express agreement, those provisions may not work to mitigate the damage caused by the production in this hypothetical. These “default” claw back provisions typically only apply to privilege and work product information, and require both that the disclosure at issue has been truly inadvertent, and that the holder of the privilege has taken reasonable steps to prevent disclosure in the first instance. See Federal Rules of Evidence, rule 502; see also generally *State Compensation Insurance Fund v. WPS, Inc.* (1999) 70 Cal.App.4th 644 [82 Cal.Rptr.2d 799]; *Rico v. Mitsubishi Motors Corp.* (2007) 42 Cal.4th 807, 817 – 818 [68 Cal.Rptr.3d 758]. As noted above, whether the disclosures at issue in our hypothetical truly were “inadvertent” under either the parties’ agreement or the relevant law is an open question. Indeed, Attorney will find even less assistance from California’s discovery clawback statute than he will from the federal equivalent, as the California statute merely addresses the procedure for litigating a dispute on a claim of inadvertent production, and not ~~with~~ the legal issue of waiver at all. ~~(See Code Civ. Proc., § 2031.285).~~