

§ STARTUPS

For some lawyers, biz is a tough language

By ADINA GENN

The solo attorney leads a hectic life, running from courthouse to courthouse, attending trials around the region. On nights and weekends the solo prepares cases. And in this shuffle, many find little time to hone the core details of their businesses. If only someone could help them.

Allison Shields, a former administrative partner and defense litigator at Melville-based Lewis, Johs Avallone, Aviles & Kaufman, gets “fired up” about law firm strategy. In her career, she’s helped her firm, as well as attorney friends, fine-tune their practices. That meant recommending ways to improve accounts receivables, develop time management skills, create and implement mission statements and plan marketing strategies.

In September, Shields, 37, opened Legal Ease Consulting, a law firm consultancy she runs from her home office in Port Jefferson Station. The company helps firms with strategic planning, marketing, performance evaluations, compensation plans and office management.

“Most lawyers are not natural business people,” she said. Practice management is not “taught in law school. It’s a huge flaw. Lawyers don’t like doing it. I show them what they can do, and lead them through the implementation.”

Her current clients are a solo attorney with a family practice, and a small litigation firm.



Shields: Many solo practitioners have little time to manage their businesses.

Each firm has different goals and specific needs, with owners who have their own work styles and personal strengths.

For instance, depending on the area of practice, a firm seeking to improve its office efficiencies may have to follow a particular set of guidelines for filing and storing documents, Shields said.

And when it comes to a marketing strategy, an attorney who doesn’t favor public speaking may garner better results by publishing articles in a trade magazine than pursuing speaking opportunities, Shields said.

This is a period of transition for Shields. She’s switched from advising partners in-house at Lewis, Johs, a firm

with 50 attorneys and 100 employees, to finding clients of her own. But Shields isn’t dissuaded. “I like to meet new people,” she said.

Shields stepped down from Lewis, Johs before the summer. She then tried to determine if entrepreneurship was her best choice, or if what she really needed was some sort of sabbatical.

While researching the marketplace, she found no local attorneys devoted to helping law firms improve the management of their practices. The sabbatical idea was out, and she formed her business.

Shields is working out an agreement with two consultants in Atlanta who need a partner with a legal background. The arrangement could help her build a clientele nationwide.

She’s spreading the word about her business by attending bar association events. She hopes to write trade magazine articles and newsletters to help educate her target market about her services. In November, she started a blog, www.legaleaseconsulting.com, in which she addresses various issues facing the solo practitioner business.

Shields is setting up free roundtable discussions with solo attorneys to discuss their current challenges. She will serve as facilitator, leaning on her practice management skills. The insights from the group will help Shields “stay on top of the market.”

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