



MWL is Pleased to Welcome 2018-2019 President Shannon Harmon

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Happy Lawyers Make Happy Clients



By Sommer Spector Angstman

Sommer Spector Angstman is an attorney with Lucère Legal, LLC. Lucère Legal, LLC is a Minneapolis based law firm serving small business owners, family owned businesses, and cabin owners with business matters, estate planning, probate administration, and litigation services.

Left to Right: Kimberly M. Hanlon, Sommer Spector Angstman

“What is it that we want out of our own life and out of the practice of law?”

“More time with our kids and family.”

“The ability to pursue a non-law business.”

“More time to travel.”

“Flexible workspace, hours, and pay.”

“A job that will fit into our life and not take over.”

The traditional law firm model will not deliver those things, and solo practice brings with it more flexibility but additional and unpaid work. Imagine: if a firm combined the resources of a sizeable firm with the flexibility of solo practice- the above goals could be achieved. This was the thought process my law partner Kimberly and I had when we sat down to create our firm. We started with the “why” and built up to the “who,” and the “what.” Lucère Legal, LLC was at the end of the equation.

The Why?

Successful business owners can tell you the “why” of their business and a law firm should be no different. Our love of the law is like a nice, stable marriage; sometimes you want to dive right in and enjoy its company, and sometimes you need a short, peaceful break. Our profession has a high burnout rate, and elevated rates of alcoholism and depression. Perhaps it’s the personalities that gravitate to the law, but perhaps it’s the long hours worked over the course of years. When you work long hours over the course of many years, you wake up to realize that not only have your joints weakened but so too have your support systems and social ties. There is a point in one’s life and career when one must prioritize their career goals or their personal goals. Mine was when I was working as a state public defender carrying a caseload of 150 felonies. As I was spending yet another night at the jail past 8PM, walking down the long, white-washed halls that smell like day old mop water, I said to myself, “There’s got to be a better way to practice law.” Lawyers in large law firms have those moments, as do government lawyers, corporate counsel and even solo practitioners. And your choice at that moment is almost a zero-sum game: stay in a conventional practice, and still spend more hours at the office than you do at home or with your family. Traditionally the practice of law has not been seen as leaving much room for other competing priorities.

But when Kimberly and I sat down we said that our firm must promote a life outside of the law. We believe that a lawyer with a satisfying life on all fronts, one who makes time for life and law, makes a better lawyer, is calm and fulfilled, and better serves our clients as happiness is contagious. All too often a lawyer taking leave to have a child or taking years off to dedicate time to family needs is seen as a liability. We see those people as an asset. A lawyer who values their family and their social ties is going to better communicate with our clients and understand their needs. Let’s not forget that raising and guiding the next generation is a commitment of significant societal importance, and the attorney who has chosen to do that has made a salient and positive impact on the world. Even if the attorney needs a part-time practice to balance an entrepreneurial pursuit, their desire to start a needed business adds value to society and to our clients. If the lawyer just desires to travel for half of the year, that too is a value added to our firm because when that lawyer steps back through the doors of our office, they will be ready and refreshed to listen to our clients and their goals. For all of those reasons, the “why” is central to our firm’s mission and structure.

The Who?

When sketching a picture of our perfect law firm we pictured an environment where the attorneys can pick up or put down as much or as little of the law as they want. They will pick and choose which cases they wish to work on, when and from where to work and if they wish to network to bring cases in. Because we anticipate that the firm would use a commission-based pay, we want a good mixture of lawyers who would enjoy the substantive law and self-starters who enjoy building networks. It’s not an absolute requirement to network for the firm, but we want lawyers to be passionate about the subject matter or the organization in which they choose to participate. We value lawyers with a collaborative and supportive nature, who are diverse in background, life-long learners and who seek to build a community with their colleagues. Internal competition and workplace politics can often be stifling and destructive in a small office, so that is not encouraged within our culture. Naturally, we thought, people who want to work at home, or want less time in the office and a lower caseload would more likely want a collaborative working environment. Not to mention- that’s the kind of workplace we want for ourselves.

The What?

So how does one make a law firm that can scale to every individual attorney’s work and life needs? Stepping away from the old vanguard of the brick and mortar law firm is one way. We office in executive suites to meet with clients and each other for meetings, but otherwise encourage work from home. Lean law firm production is another way. We changed the traditional offering of an employer to employee of a fixed salary to commission based pay that rewards both the work done on the case and the network that sourced the case. Our firm offers flat fees whenever possible to our clients and as such we can dedicate a percentage of the flat fee to each portion of the case worked. A technology infused practice streamlines remote work with cloud based work flow, calendars, on-line collaboration through video conferencing and shared file storage. If you have an internet connection, you can work on a case, even if you happen to be sitting on a boat or enjoying the cabin at the time. We have created the operational processes necessary to build this system of independent lawyers who work together under one virtual roof.

The title of this article is not just our mantra but it’s how we live our life and run our law firm. Our vision for Lucère is to offer to lawyers who may otherwise be marginalized for prioritizing family or dissatisfied with the traditional practice model, the four corners of a law firm: the marketing, the finance, the operation and human resources, within which they can practice on their own terms. Our goal is to create a cadre of attorneys who practice in complimentary but diverse areas who can share in the firm’s four corners, comradery and clientele. We are always looking to grow, so if you feel that you would be a good fit with our “why,” please reach out to us and see where it takes you. ■

Negotiating Family Leave

By Christine B. Courtney

Christine B. Courtney is the Victim Services Coordinator at the Minnesota Elder Justice Center. As Victim Services Coordinator, Chris works with primary and secondary victims of elder abuse on various victim services programs, including legal representation, economic advocacy, domestic violence support, safety planning, and vulnerable adult systems navigation. To unwind at the end of the day, Chris and her spouse, Ryan Courtney, spend their time parenting their three children: Robinson (6), Seraphine (4), and Arthur (9 months).

My first child was born during the exam week of my final semester of law school. Two weeks later, I began my bar review course. Two and a half months later, I sat for the bar exam. I began my first full-time job as an attorney six months after I took the bar exam.

My second child was born while I worked in private practice at a firm with about 15 attorneys. I took four weeks “off”, checking voicemail and email every day. For the next eight weeks, I worked two days a week.

My third child was born while I worked at a small nonprofit. I took two months off (no voicemail or email this time), and then spent two months working two days a week.

Without question, negotiating my maternity leave in private practice was the most difficult experience of the three. I had been with the firm for less than a year when my baby was born. I was given no cues or suggestions for practically planning my maternity leave. I was expected to, and did, propose my own plan for the leave. Without any framework or input to base my leave proposal on, I asked for a leave that required constant checking in and I did not feel secure enough to request more “unplugged” time with my new child. While I would like to believe that this firm was an outlier, I fear that this is an all-too-common experience.

Parental leave is a complicated experience to navigate for any woman, and particularly for women in male-dominated fields. In many law firms, there is no parental leave policy at all, and short-term disability is not offered. To say the least, this makes family planning extremely challenging.

Choosing how to structure your own parental leave is a highly personal decision based on many factors: the nature of your practice and business, the ability of your colleagues to manage your work in your absence, your personal finances, your family support systems, and (quite obviously to you, although perhaps not to your employers) the nature of your actual birthing experience, the trauma to your own body, and the health of your newborn child. There is another aspect that can significantly influence how you structure your leave: your employer’s explicit policy on parental leave, its caregiver benefits, and the ability to sign up for short-term disability benefits. The absence of those three things also sends its own (sometimes unintentional) message about how your employer feels about parental leave.

My spouse is an attorney, and a shareholder in a firm with less than 20 attorneys. After the birth of our second child, he and his fellow shareholders noticed that a couple talented female attorneys left and had children shortly thereafter. His firm had no stated parental leave beyond allowing for legally required time off. They offered no short-term disability benefits.

After some serious, targeted discussions among the (largely male) shareholders, my husband’s firm now has a parental leave policy and benefit for eligible employees. The standards for eligibility and scope of benefit are available to employees and potential employees prior to pregnancy. They also offer short-term disability benefits. In the year and a half since that change was made, his firm has had more pregnancies than in the prior decade. Only one of those babies (ours) was born to a male attorney.

Without doubt, this is not earth-shattering information for anyone reading this article. Explicit parental leave policies matter to young employees, and they have a direct relationship with retention. I encourage any shareholders or partners reading this article to remember that they are in a position to dramatically impact their employees’ lives, and I hope that they consider how their firm’s policies work in practice. Steps taken by an employer to acknowledge and accommodate the personal milestone of parenthood may also create or strengthen a culture where employees feel valued. While many strongly dislike the tradition of the “office baby shower”, it has one significant benefit: it symbolically demonstrates that the organization supports the employee in this significant personal landmark.

Unfortunately, as young female professionals, we cannot always choose our employers based on their caregiver leave (nor are we encouraged to ask about this particular benefit during the interview process). An obvious problem of finishing law school in your mid-twenties is that it can be difficult to gain social and political clout in the office while still in your child-bearing years. However, in that situation, I would remind my fellow attorneys and aspiring parents: consider the leave that works best for you and best for your career, and then ask for it. You do not need to fit your family within a six-week box if you feel that a different arrangement would work better for your family, your work, and your needs. When preparing for my last leave, I considered my organization’s explicit caregiver leave policy, the nature of my work in the organization, and my own needs—and I asked for the leave that I wanted. Without question, my third parental leave was my most joyful and easiest, and best tailored to my needs and my family’s needs. I could not have gotten it if I had not asked for it. ■

Did You Know?

The MWL Compendium
is our extensive online database
of resources related to women
in the legal profession.

Find out more at
www.mwlawyers.org/compendium