



Pigs Starve

By Justin Miller justin@lawbizhelp.com
Independent Small Business Consultant

I have a friend, who is also premier attorney in Georgia, who taught me a very valuable business lesson: pigs starve. No matter how successful you think you are, no matter how good you are at your job, if you hog all the work and try to do everything yourself, one day, somewhere, you will starve. It may not be a financial starvation. It may be a mental one or a professional one or a personal one. Eventually something important in your life will break, and you will wish you had more time to make it right.

Perhaps one of the toughest decisions for any business to make and definitely the one that most small business owners lose sleep over is the decision to hire. Whether it's a temporary or permanent position, admin support or legal talent, adding even a single resource to your practice can be a daunting undertaking. Forget all the employment laws and administration for a second. What if this idea fails? What if you can't pay them? What if it doesn't work out? All legitimate fears. But consider this: if you do hire someone that a) you can afford and b) is a competent individual, you can improve your professional, personal and financial position in as little as just a few weeks.

Leveraging Others

Adding the right resource to your particular situation can produce benefits that DIRECTLY IMPACT PROFIT AND PEACE OF MIND through a concept called leverage. Leverage is the power to get things done with less effort. It is a concept of using assets (e.g., people, technology, processes) as a strategic advantage to make something easier, more efficient and more profitable. Here are just a few ways your business can leverage a new hire:

- Increase your time to do the things you actually want to do at work (delegation and project management)
- Increase your firm's efficiency (time per project and time to profit)
- Do the same case work for less cost to you (moving work up and down your value chain)
- Increase the impact per project/case (automate repetitive tasks)

But hiring someone takes courage and grit. Most of all it takes planning and focus. From working with a variety of small firm owners, I have compiled a list of some familiar (and most common) circumstances that may indicate you need to consider hiring:

1. You are referring cases out that are in your area of expertise or an area you would like to develop, but you don't have the time to do the work.

2. Other attorneys have been referring cases to you, but you are at the point where you might have to turn the work away.
3. You aren't returning client phone calls as promptly as you used to.
4. You see opportunities on the horizon, but you don't have enough time to follow up on the ideas that you are seeing.
5. Your work life has intruded on your personal time in a way that is unacceptable to you, your family or your significant others.

Any of these sound familiar? If so, don't fret. You are not alone. I would guess every small business owner has faced something similar in his/her career.

Pulling the Trigger

You might be thinking: "This all sounds good, but I'm a busy lawyer. How can I possibly make it happen?" The truth is, if you don't make time for the important areas of running and growing your business, they will never happen on their own. However, hiring someone (or, for that matter, anything that deals with the running of your business) does not have to be the end of practicing law. Here are a few quick steps to help you get started:

1. Take Time to Plan and Think – While you are waiting for that networking contact to arrive for lunch or while in the shower (one of my favorite entrepreneurial times), ask yourself "what are my objectives?" What are you trying to accomplish? Be strategic on what you are looking to offload and where you want your practice to go in the future. What tasks do you need help with? What tasks can you make more money off of? What type of personality does your practice need? You need to be CRYSTAL CLEAR on what skills you need and what type of person would be most valuable.
2. Get Outside Help – We've already talked about trying to do everything yourself, so I won't repeat myself. Unless you are also an expert recruiter, get help. Get an objective person (not family) to help in the defining, screening and interview processes. Those of you who have ever hired a "nightmare" employee know this can be invaluable. Once you've clearly defined who you are looking for, go where the talent you need is – schools, job boards (free and paid), Bar associations, other firms/networking, and CLE courses. Using recruiters can be valuable, but make sure you are super clear on what you are looking for and watch the costs – negotiate fees whenever possible.
3. Act – One of the worst things you can do at this point is freeze up and do nothing. Think about where you want the firm to be in the next year. Think about improving your work/life balance. Make the decision.

Expanding your practice can be one of the most rewarding and fruitful experiences an entrepreneur can have. 2012 may bring many new changes and challenges to you and your practice. I wish each and every one of you great success for years to come.