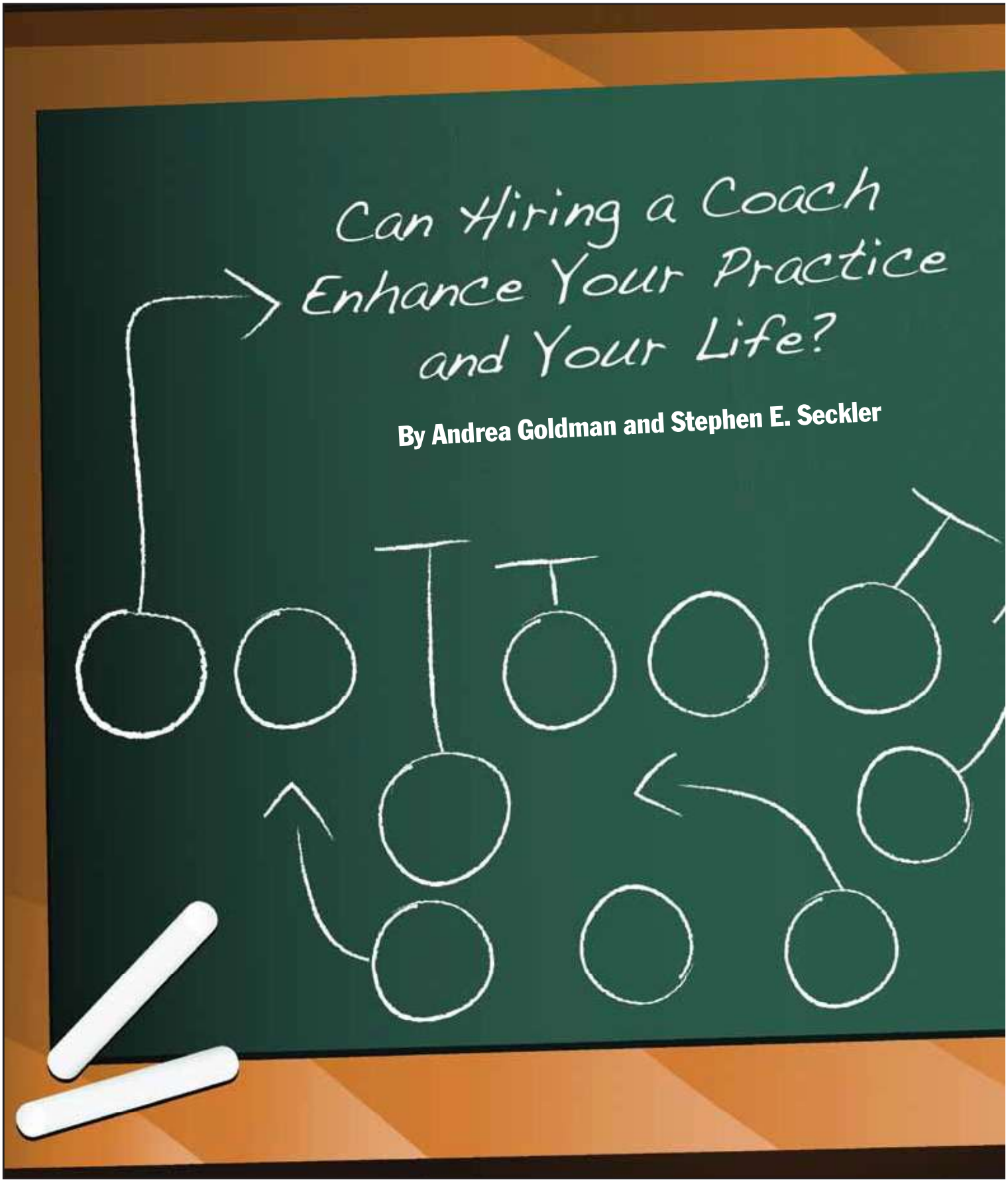

By Andrea Goldman and Stephen E. Seckler

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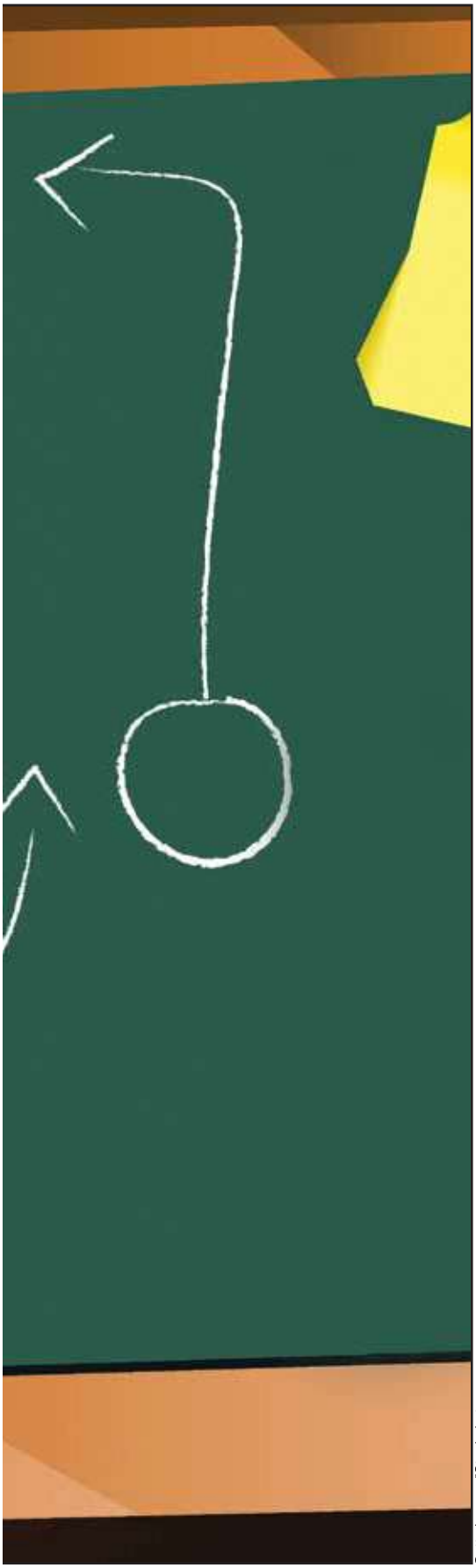

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Individualism has always been a strong theme in the culture of the United States. The notion that anyone can make it here on his or her own is practically woven into our DNA. In truth, however, all successful people have had some sort of help along the way.

Well-run corporations understand this. In the past 20 years, the field of executive coaching has grown substantially. Companies have realized that senior managers are more likely to achieve peak performance if they are coached by an experienced outside professional who acts as a sounding board and a reality check.

As the field of law has grown more competitive, individual lawyers and law firms have been turning to coaching as well. Try Googling "attorney coaching" and you'll get close to 2 million hits.

Individual lawyers and law firms are now seeing a gradual improvement in the economy, but they are facing new challenges where the ability to generate work and do things better, faster, and cheaper has become even more essential.

Unfortunately, many law firms are short on internal resources to teach lawyers how to manage or market more effectively. Furthermore, billable hours and marketing pressure have made senior partners less available to mentor up-and-coming associates. Those who work for small firms or practice as solo attorneys are largely on their own, with no idea where to get advice when issues arise.

Continuing legal education programs and other outside training can provide some of the solution, but for most of us, attending a few seminars and reading a few books is not enough to help us through the various stages of our careers. Coaching is a way to bridge the gap.

In this article, we will explain what coaching is, how it works, when it is appropriate, and what to consider in hiring a coach.

What Is Coaching?

Professional coaching is for individuals who want to elevate their performance, increase their personal and professional happiness, and acquire missing skills that are necessary for success. It is similar in many ways to personal training. You might hire a personal trainer to help you develop and follow a fitness plan. Although you may already know how to get in shape, you may be uncertain about how much time you should spend on each machine at the gym or how to use these machines properly.

Along the way, the trainer helps to create short-term goals that support your long-term goal. He then holds you accountable for accomplishing these goals. The trainer might support you when you are having difficulty and even suggest another approach when something is not working. Or he might push you to the edge of your comfort zone.

Similarly, a lawyer hires a coach to help clarify professional goals and create an action plan for reaching these goals. Along the way, the coach provides support and serves as a sounding board and a resource. The coach also helps the

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A coach can help a lawyer identify problem areas, create an action plan, and follow through.

attorney identify and move past roadblocks that are preventing success. A good coach then holds the lawyer accountable for achieving these goals.

What Issues Are Suitable for Attorney Coaching?

Attorneys can use a coach to work on a broad mix of professional issues at any stage of their career. Many attorneys choose to work on business development because selling is not a skill that comes naturally to many attorneys, and it is not a skill that is taught in law school. Other lawyers hire a coach because they need help with time management. Still others want to run their practice more efficiently or manage their support staff more effectively.

Allison Shields, a coach based on Long Island, works with clients who need support in these areas and who may be experiencing burnout. Some of her clients come to her to reverse what she calls "lawyer meltdown." She helps lawyers deal with these issues, along with general office management and marketing.

Cordell Parvin, a Dallas-based lawyer who spent 36 years practicing law and building a national construction practice, covers many of these same issues when coaching clients. In addition, he helps clients improve their office communication and team-building skills.

Why Attorney Coaching?

Attorneys are good candidates for coaching because they are results-oriented. As busy professionals, attorneys have difficulty focusing consistently on things that are important but not urgent. Billable work often becomes the only priority in a lawyer's day. Important activities such as administrative tasks and marketing frequently get put off. In addition, although attorneys may get good training in lawyering in the early years of practice, they are less likely to get career guidance or guidance in developing a book of business.

Cynthia Pladziewicz, author of a chapter on coaching in *The Art and Science of Strategic Talent Management in Law Firms* (edited by Terri Mottershead, Thomson Reuters, 2010), has practiced law, worked as a clinical psychologist, and now serves as chief development officer for Thompson & Knight in Dallas. Pladziewicz explains that attorneys are good candidates for coaching because they score high on personality traits such as skepticism and autonomy and low on traits such as sociability. Because coaching is generally one-on-one and not a "one-size-fits-all" solution, coaching gives lawyers the chance to take the lead on finding their own solutions by asking in-depth, individualized questions. This helps them to get past their own skepticism and not waste time on issues they don't find relevant.

Coaching picks up where traditional consulting leaves off. In a typical consulting relationship, a consultant will identify ways that you can achieve your desired objective. The end product is often a report detailing the steps that are necessary to achieve the desired outcome. But this by itself is usually inadequate to get the desired results. Coaching ensures that the client implements the recommendations.

When Should I Hire a Coach?

There is no "right" time to hire a coach. RJon Robins, a coach based in Florida, says that the time to hire a coach is "ideally, before the 'need' for an objective perspective is acutely felt." According to Robins, who focuses exclusively on sole practitioners, most lawyers do not come to solo practice with the business skills they need. He believes that coaching early on can avoid a lot of problems down the road.

However, let's face it. Attorneys will not usually hire a coach until they feel a pressing need. In addition to those starting a new practice, lawyers at different stages in their careers find themselves in need of help. Perhaps you are considering growing your practice and don't know how to start out. You may be stuck in practice areas that are not satisfying. Or maybe you are putting in a lot of hours, but your effort is not reflected in the bottom line. A coach can help a lawyer identify problem areas, create an action plan, and follow through.

Sometimes, a firm will pay for an individual lawyer to receive coaching. The lawyer should only accept this benefit if he or she is prepared to do the work. Coaching is about making change, and according to Pladziewicz, it only works if the lawyer is willing to put in the effort.

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Both authors of this article have worked with several coaches. Andrea Goldman has worked with coaches at three stages in her career: first, when deciding how to proceed after being unable to develop a mediation business; next, when deciding whether to dissolve a partnership; and finally, when the economy (and her practice) was suffering, as a volunteer for an *ABA Journal* article on coaching (for more, see www.abajournal.com/magazine/article/turnaround).

The first coach was not a lawyer, but she gave Goldman practical advice about groups to join for networking and an action plan for becoming reconnected in the legal arena. The second coach, whom Goldman consulted when she was in a partnership, helped her to see that she and her partner did not have the same goals and that the best option was for them to part ways. It was an extremely difficult decision, but her practice grew by 25 percent in the following year as a result.

When the *ABA Journal* was looking for volunteers to work with a coach, Goldman was eager to get some advice about how to change the nature of her practice. She was overextended and trying to develop her arbitration, mediation, and litigation practices all at once. The coach, a former law firm administrator with a background in accounting, convinced Goldman to take a hard look at her practice and throw all of her efforts into client development. They identified a profile of her ideal clients (contractors and construction companies) and focused on how to attract them. In the past year, Goldman has become actively involved in two construction organizations and has become known as an expert on the Environmental Protection Agency's Renovation, Repair, and Painting Rule. This has resulted in numerous invitations for speaking engagements, an increase in her target clientele, and the opportunity to phase out clients that do not fit her ideal profile. Goldman's job satisfaction and income have increased dramatically as a result.

How Do I Choose a Coach?

Hiring a coach is a very personal decision. Everyone contacted for this article agreed that it is a good idea to interview several prospects before making a decision. Pladziewicz, who runs internal group coaching sessions and hires external coaches, points out that many coaches will give you a free coaching session. This provides you with the opportunity to see if you have good chemistry with that individual. Beyond chemistry, there are some objective considerations.

Of course, cost is a consideration. The more specialized your need may be, the more you should expect to pay. For example, a coach who can help with improving your general delegation skills should probably cost less than a coach who has deep subject-matter knowledge about how to set strategic direction for a midsized law firm.

Decide whether you are comfortable working with a coach by phone (this is actually fairly common in the coaching profession) or if you prefer to meet with someone in person. Many issues can be dealt with by phone, but if you are working with a coach on your presentation skills or interviewing skills, you really need to meet face-to-face.

There are a range of styles in coaching, and you should decide which style best suits your personality. Do you want someone who will "hold your feet to the fire," or do you prefer to work with someone who provides lots of encouragement? Or some combination of the two?

Another consideration in choosing a coach is deciding if you would like to work with someone who is very structured or someone who is flexible. Shields, for example, works with her clients in a fairly flexible way, but when she works with them on particular issues (e.g., time management), she has a structured approach to helping clients build these skills.

Different coaches have different areas of expertise. Sometimes this will be an important consideration. For example, many lawyers prefer working with coaches who are themselves lawyers and who understand what it is like to practice. However, if you are looking to transition out of the law or want perspective from someone who can help you market to a particular industry, then a law degree might not be helpful.

Both the authors of this article have found that different coaches may be useful at different stages of your career. For example, when Stephen Seckler was in the legal search business, he hired a business coach to help him make better decisions about what searches he should accept. This coach had a strong sales background. Several years later, Seckler

software tech

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Group coaching offers the added benefit of synergy with other group members.

worked with a coach who had a background in psychology. At this stage, Seckler was trying to learn how to deal more effectively with the rejection that comes with cold calling.

The bottom line is to find someone you feel you can work with and trust. Usually, this will mean finding someone who has been referred to you by someone else you trust. However, make sure to have at least a brief conversation with the individual before making the decision to engage him or her.

How Do Coaches Charge for Their Services?

Coaching fees generally range from about $400 to $1,000 per month, although there are some very high end coaches who charge more. Some coaches establish a set number of sessions and charge by the month. Some charge hourly. Many have flexible arrangements and a variety of programs as the service itself tends to be highly customized.

Some coaches combine coaching with consulting. Shields, for example, draws on her experience in managing a law firm to help her clients set up good practice systems. This may be part of a fixed-fee arrangement that includes both coaching and consulting.

If individual coaching is not in the budget, some coaches offer group coaching sessions. Ellen Ostrow, who is located in Washington, D.C., periodically runs groups that target women attorneys. Group coaching can sometimes have the added benefit of synergy with other group members.

Many states' law office management assistance programs provide limited coaching for free. In addition, the International Coach Federation (www.coachfederation.org) can connect you with trainees who need to log coaching hours for their certification. Online listserves such as the American Bar Association's SoloSez (www.solosez.org) are another great resource for discussing law practice management issues.

Who Are Coaches?

At present, coaching is a relatively unregulated profession. Professionals come to coaching with a wide range of backgrounds. Lawyers often work with experienced members of the bar who have been through their own process and want to share what they have learned. Coaches may also have a background in psychology or career counseling, and some have been through a certification program offered by the International Coach Federation.

Isn't It Time?

Real career satisfaction takes both hard work and planning. At times working as a lawyer can become a vicious cycle of constantly trying to bill more hours and attract more clients. Many lawyers do not take the time to reflect on what they really want. Some do not know what steps to take to achieve their goals. Others know the steps but cannot get themselves to take action. Still others have trouble balancing work, family, and leisure. A coach can help provide solutions to these issues. GPSOLO

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