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Nielsen helps clients improve

Lawyer-turned-career counselor offers advice to attorneys facing challenges

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After 22 years working as a career coach for attorneys, Sheila Markin Nielsen sees it all — from the high-level partner who can't communicate with associates to the junior attorney too timid to earn the confidence of clients.

"I see many trend lines," she said. "I get a chance to hear the stresses that partners are under and how that plays out when they interact with associates. And I understand the stresses associates struggle with and how that plays out when they're trying to manage their life."

Nielsen, 63, also works with lawyers looking for work or trying to navigate a career change. Some seek her out themselves, while others are sent to her by their firm.

Nielsen, 63, said she frequently draws on her previous work as an attorney to understand law firm politics and the challenges of legal work.

She received a master's degree in social science in 1973 from Bryn Mawr College and then graduated from Temple University James E. Beasley School of Law in 1977. Nielsen spent the first part of her career as a criminal prosecutor, first as an assistant district attorney in Philadelphia and then as an assistant U.S. attorney in Chicago.

In both roles, she noticed that many colleagues sought her out for advice while at work, she said.

"A lot of times other assistants would come in and shut the door and tell me their personal problems," she said. "I think there's something about me and there's an

aptitude for counseling, that's just part of who I am."

Nielsen left the U.S. attorney's office in 1985 to spend more time at home. She started her career coaching business, Nielsen Career Consulting, in 1990.

Her ability to connect with people makes her unusually good as a career coach, said Katherine A. Erwin, a former practicing attorney who now works as an independent career counselor.

Erwin said she learned tips from Nielsen on how to become a trusted career coach by observing sessions between Nielsen and her clients.

"I think her years of experience cause her to see just about every way lawyers can be unhappy in their practice," Erwin said. "... She has an amazing way of hearing what people aren't saying and asking the follow-up question."

“Think in terms of a sandwich. The first thing you give somebody is a positive, then you hit them with the negative, then you end up with the other piece of the sandwich, on a positive note.”



Sheila Markin Nielsen

Nielsen said about 60 to 70 percent of her clients come to her needing help with finding a job or making a career transition.

Pamela S. DiCarlantonio sought Nielsen's help when she wanted to achieve a better work-life balance several years ago. At the time, she worked for a large law firm and put in very long hours because she enjoyed working hard, she said.

"For me, it was a personal challenge to know when to shut it off and when to go home," said DiCarlantonio, who now works as managing director at Major, Lindsey & Africa, a legal recruiting firm. "Sheila taught me a lot about myself."

Nielsen asked DiCarlantonio to identify the factors in a job that remained most important to her and then measured those factors against DiCarlantonio's job at the time, to see how well they matched.

"It was enormously helpful to do that exercise," Nielsen said. "A lot of people don't take a step back and really think through whether they're in the right place and whether they need to make a change."

Nielsen's other focus area concerns attorneys who face difficulties in the workplace.

In some cases, the traits that

helped an attorney reach the top of their profession become a downfall in the office.

"Strong personalities tend to become leaders of a firm," she said. "Sometimes those strategies that work in a courtroom to berate opposing counsel turn out to be things that when you come back to your firm, create a lot of stress and are toxic."

Nielsen encounters other clients who don't know how to communicate with associates in a constructive way and seem overly critical.

"I might say, 'Think in terms of a sandwich. The first thing you give somebody is a positive, then you hit them with the negative, then you end up with the other piece of the sandwich, on a positive note,'" she said.

Small issues, such as tone, remain simple to correct and make a large difference, Nielsen said. She tells clients to imagine the RMS Queen Elizabeth 2 and how a small turn of a ship's wheel can eventually cause the entire vessel to turn around.

"I might say to a client, 'Try this very small change and see what happens,'" she said.

When she provides career advice, Nielsen said she encourages clients to consider the job search like an "epic adventure" and an opportunity to make lasting connections using networking.

Aaron S. Kase, a partner at Levenfeld, Pearlstein LLC, said Nielsen helped him network effectively with the right people when he moved from another firm to Levenfeld, Pearlstein in 2002.

"She had me visualize the people who are gurus, the people who know a lot of other people, who understand what is going on in their practice area," he said. "... That approach takes a lot of the stress and wasted time out of it. Believe it or not, she actually made it fun for me."

He said Nielsen removed the "mystery" of the job search to enable him to find a position with more of an entrepreneurial client base.

"She understands what kind of personalities fit into what type of legal roles and sometimes attorneys can deceive themselves a little bit as to what their highest and best use is," he said. "She's very clear-eyed about that."

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