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Word with the Boss: Pat Scully faces a new role and challenge as Bernstein Shur's new CEO

By Edward D. Murphy | December 19, 2013

Pat Scully is taking over as law firm Bernstein Shur's chief executive officer at the beginning of 2014. He graduated from Dartmouth and the University of Maine School of Law, and has been with Bernstein Shur for nearly 25 years, with his practice concentrated in energy regulatory issues. Bernstein Shur is one of northern New England's largest law firms, with more than 100 lawyers in offices in Portland, Augusta, and Manchester, N.H.



Patrick Scully, Bernstein Shur
Photo Credit: John Patriquin | PPH

Q: What does the managing partner of a law firm do?

A: We now call it the chief executive officer. It's really the top administrative position for our law firm. It involves setting the direction, implementing our strategic plan, being responsible for the long-term direction of the law firm, and meeting its financial goals and our client service goals. It's the CEO in the same sense that it would be at any other company.

Q: Will you be managing partner for a set time?

A: In law firm parlance, I serve at the pleasure of my partners. We don't have any rotation and we're not appointed to a fixed term.

Q: Will you continue to practice law?

A: I am going to try to keep a part of my practice, but I suspect it will be a reasonably small part of my day going forward. We've brought in some new people and our clients are aware of the transition, but I think it's important for me to maintain a connection to what we actually do. But the vast majority of my time will be spent on essentially running the law firm.

Q: What are your plans? Are there major changes coming?

A: I don't think that we are all that different from other businesses. Especially since the recession, we operate in a very different business and legal market. Our clients are demanding and expecting more from their law firm, at less cost. Our strategic plan is what we as a law firm want to do, what kinds of services we offer, and where we offer them. How do

we take our firm to the next level? In some sense our strategic plan is probably similar to many other companies.

Q: Has the legal profession changed in the last 10 or 20 years?

A: I can't speak for law firms in general, but when I started 30 years ago we were still seen as a midsize firm and did a general practice for our clients. We've become bigger and more focused in terms of the areas of the practice we cover. Our geographic footprint is dramatically different. When I started work here, the vast majority of our work came from Maine clients. Now the majority is from outside of Maine. As for our services, we have a national bankruptcy practice that is dramatically different in its nature and level of sophistication, and our energy practice is global. What we're finding is that it no longer matters where your headquarters are. We still spend a lot of time and effort supporting Maine businesses, but we can support businesses from all over the country. If we're good, a firm in Portland can compete with any in the country.

Q: Is that because of changes in technology?

A: An awful lot of both the information we need to get and our interaction with our clients, a lot of that is done electronically, and our access to resources now is much easier than it used to be. The geographic barriers have really fallen. The other part is that our clients' expectations and demands are different. It used to be they would gravitate to a big New York or D.C. firm, because that's what you were expected to do. Companies now, and their in-house general counsels, are a lot more focused on value and getting legal services at a reasonable, predictable cost. That's really where a lot of our success has come from: working with a client that has a large geographic footprint. If you can demonstrate to them that you can do it really well, they're going to give you a shot at a project they have elsewhere.

Q: Are fewer people going to law school these days?

A: I don't think the interest in the law has faded, but application numbers are down across the country fairly significantly - we're talking about a 25 percent drop in applications. Since the recession, lawyers are being laid off and fewer are being promoted to partner. We're in a period where the law school population has gotten small in response to the economy. But we see more quality applicants now that we used to because the environment is so challenging now. At one level I feel bad because it's a reflection of how difficult it is, but we've been reaping the benefits of it.

Q: Is it easy or difficult to recruit to Portland?

A: It's gotten easier for us. We don't go west of the Mississippi much, mostly up and down the East Coast. We're in a lot of those markets, and two things are happening: We've got a lot of applicants available to us, and Portland's reputation just gets better every year. Its reputation as a city and a place to live has gotten more and more noticed. People know about Portland, and see this as an opportunity to have a high-level practice and also be able to live in a beautiful community and have a meaningful quality of life and a short commute.

Q: What will you miss most from your practice?

A: The thing I will miss the most is the personal relationship you develop with your clients, when you can help somebody solve a problem as their counsel. It's a very gratifying thing. With a lot of my clients, you start to feel you're a part of their organization. I start to use the word "we" a lot when I'm talking to them. That connection and sense of a common purpose is very gratifying.

Q: What will you miss least?

A: Filling out my time sheet and sending out bills to my clients. There's not a thing gratifying about that part of the job. But you have to keep the engine running.