

The Federal Lawyer in Cyberia

MICHAEL J. TONSING

Virtual Law Now Available

Your Cyberian columnist, always on the alert for things that you should know about, got on the trail of a North Carolina attorney, Stephanie Kimbro, after reading a feature story about her in the Oct. 8, 2007, issue of *LawyersUSA*—a weekly tabloid out of Boston that caters to the needs of solo practitioners and smaller firms nationwide. (See www.lawyersusaonline.com.) I called Stephanie and talked with her briefly about her practice, one that is—pardon the pun—virtually unique. As the article put it, “Stepanie Kimbro doesn’t work a typical 9 to 5 job. Instead, she practices law early in the morning, late at night and during her daughter’s nap time.”



Stephanie’s unique schedule, which immediately caught my eye, was made possible by a concept she developed herself—with help from her “techie” husband. According to the article,

In June 2006, Kimbro launched Kimbro Legal Services (www.kimbrolaw.com), an entirely Internet-based law firm she runs from her home. While some firms and legal websites offer pre-packaged documents or forms, Kimbro’s website allows her to interact with her clients and provide customized legal advice: clients contact her via the website with their legal issues, and she responds in kind.

With a primarily transactional practice—performing such legal work as business agreements, marital separations and wills—Kimbro uses a secure website to work with her clients, some of whom are 400 miles away.

“[It] lets me tap into a whole new market,” she said, noting that she now has access to clients far beyond her home in Wilmington, N.C.



A veteran of a small firm, Stephanie Kimbro found herself a stay-at-home mom, so she decided to change the world. While she was with the small firm, she had noticed that there were certain smaller, transactional matters that the firm could not perform cost-effectively. That observation spawned her virtual practice. “The firm just couldn’t afford to spend the time on these smaller matters, given its overhead,” she told *LawyersUSA*. “It really got me thinking: there was

a gap of middle to lower income people who had a need for affordable legal services.”

It didn’t hurt that Stephanie’s husband, Benjamin Norman, was a programmer with 10 years of experience creating software for businesses and courts. He understood the importance of security features and was able to design a complete virtual law office: the back end of the software that handles billing, payroll, accounting, and a law office’s other practical needs as well as a secure Web site that gave each client his or her own protected home page after an account was created.

Thus Kimbro Legal Services™ was launched, and it now offers relatively simple transactional legal services to clients in North Carolina over a secure Internet connection. Potential clients can request specific legal services for which they receive a fixed-price quote. If Stephanie is unable to meet the prospective client’s needs, she offers to refer them to another attorney who can.

“Finding clients hasn’t been a problem,” says Kimberly. It is interesting to note that more of her business comes from referrals than from search engines. “Some of my clients are mothers who don’t want to have to pay for child care to leave their homes and meet with lawyers in person, so they use the Internet. Others are people who are so accustomed to shopping online that it’s comfortable for them to find legal services there as well,” she told *LawyersUSA*.

Her practice centers on estate planning services, living wills, and health care power of attorney documents, and, even though much of what she does involves fixed-price services, her software is also set up to use the billable hour model typical for brick-and-mortar practices geared toward litigation.

The success she has experienced has led Stephanie Kimbro to champion the concept of the virtual law office. What’s more, Kimbro now seeks to replicate her business. She and her husband are currently launching a second business that will expand the business of virtual law offices and put others into the same mode that she invented for herself. (In fact, last June, the couple filed a patent application for the software and their business method.)

Kimbro and Norman already have launched their second site, dubbing their new product Virtual Law Office Technology, or VLOTech™ (www.vlotech.com). They aim to provide other attorneys with secure software as a service: a Web-based product that connects solo and small firm law practices with online

clients. (VLOTech provides the same security protection that one gets when banking online. Data is also encrypted at the storage level using industry-proven algorithms.)

Because it exists on a server rather than on one's own computer, VLOTech provides services, such as regular hardware and software updates, as part of its standard support. As new software features become available, each client's VLO is updated automatically. According to Norman, VLOTech is a flexible product that is compatible with other legal and office software products. The site has import and export functionality so that lawyers can customize it to fit in with their existing legal and office software products. VLOTech runs its operations out of Wilmington, N.C., using the same virtual office software that Kimberly uses with her own clients.

Some of what this new cadre of online lawyers will provide is called "unbundled" legal services. That means that an attorney or law firm creates a legal document or provides the legal advice, but the clients themselves are responsible for either filing the legal document or ensuring that the document is properly executed and handled according to the instructions provided by the attorney. Kimbro expects that each VLO will be operated differently, based on the attorney's practice and the state bar regulations in the state where that attorney practices law.

Many state bar associations have already published articles about the need for attorneys to offer unbundled legal services and provide more affordable and accessible legal services to the public. Some states, such as North Carolina, have specifically published opinions about legal ethics that permit virtual law office practices. (VLOTech expects to provide its customers with recommendations for best ethics practices for operating a VLO and also suggests that its lawyer-customers contact their state bar's ethics committee if they have any specific questions regarding the marketing or operation of a VLO.)

According to a recent report from the E-Lawyering Task Force of the American Bar Association, which was quoted on the VLOTech Web site, "The highest leadership of the ABA knows we need a catalyst for lawyers to adapt and flourish in the new technology-driven economic order. The Internet presents us with unparalleled opportunities and powerful new tools to provide legal services. Innovative law firms and web-based companies (many run by lawyers) have already cast off—successfully—into these uncharted waters. They have set up Web sites that go far beyond a list of partners, practice areas and a map to the law firm."

It seems to me that the idea will be an attractive one for many practitioners, especially those with a wanderlust, because VLOTech will allow their offices to exist anywhere they can gain access to the Internet—from their desktop or laptop computer or from a mobile device. The online software itself serves as

an attorney's virtual law office, handling administrative and management tasks as well as communication with the client. And, of course, a VLO Web site is open to prospective clients 24/7, enabling it to serve as a form of ongoing client development and revenue generation.

Subscribers to the VLOTech service are charged on a monthly, per-seat basis, which ranges from \$180 to \$320 per month. There is no annual licensing fee or long-term contract required.

Conclusion

For most lawyers, a virtual law office may be just an interesting curiosity. For some of us in Cyberia, however, it may be the answer to our prayers. See you next month in Cyberia. **TFL**

Michael J. Tonsing practices law in San Francisco. He is a member of the FBA editorial board and has served on the Executive Committee of Law Practice Management and Technology Section of the State Bar of California. He also mentors less-experienced litigators by serving as a "second chair" to their trials (www.Your-Second-Chair.com). He can be reached at mtonsing@lawyer.com.

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