



*Allison C. Shields* Legal Ease Consulting, Inc.  
Allison@LegalEaseConsulting.com

*Preventing “Lawyer Meltdown” and Creating Productive, Profitable and Enjoyable Law Practices*



## **Innovation vs. Systematization: Can They Be Reconciled?**

*By Allison C. Shields, Esq.*

Seth Godin and Michael Gerber are both very popular authors of business books, but some think that their approaches to business are in direct conflict. Can these two business approaches, one which focuses on innovation and one which focuses on systematization, be reconciled?

### **Gerber vs. Godin**

In the *E-Myth Revisited*, Michael Gerber extols the virtues of systematization and encourages entrepreneurs to work *\*on\** their businesses, rather than *\*in\** them. One of Godin’s books, *Linchpin*, advocates becoming ‘indispensable,’ which he defines as doing emotional labor – producing interactions both within and outside of your organization that organizations and people care about. A linchpin is a linchpin precisely because he or she is difficult to replace; no one else could do things in quite the same way.

Rather than seeing these two concepts as opposed to one another, I see them as complementary to or supporting one another. As a law firm owner, you are an entrepreneur, and you need to make sure that your client work gets done efficiently and effectively. That often requires good systems. But part of keeping clients happy and generating referrals is providing clients with an exceptional experience, and the best client experiences are produced by what Godin calls linchpins.

### Good Enough is No Longer Good Enough

Godin believes that our culture of consumption has created a world of work in which people put their heads down and just do their jobs. The "more, cheaper, faster" mentality has resulted in commoditization and homogeneity. The same is true in the legal world. In most cases, it's difficult to differentiate one firm from another.

In working with my clients, I've even heard law firm partners say to me point blank, "But we're really NOT any different than that other firm down the block." It's no wonder that law firms marketing all looks the same if the firms themselves cannot differentiate their services.

This is precisely Godin's point – in the quest to satisfy the cry for "more, cheaper and faster," businesses (including law firms) have squelched individuality. The internet has only made matters worse by showing consumers that the 'products' that lawyers deliver – wills, incorporation documents, and real estate contracts, can be purchased faster and cheaper online, without the high cost and hassle of hiring an attorney (LegalZoom, anyone?)

**So how can lawyers compete?** Godin would say the only way is to be exceptional. Being good, merely meeting expectations isn't remarkable – and if it isn't remarkable, it's interchangeable.

## Systematize to Become Exceptional

At first blush, Godin's and Gerber's approaches seem to be diametrically opposed. After all, if you systematize and make your processes replicable, you are, by definition, not remarkable. But here is the problem – a LOT of what is done on a day to day basis within any law firm *is* replicable – and it *should* be. You still need to produce the 'product' for your client, to meet the deadlines, to file the papers, to write or review the contract, to create the estate plan.

If you look at your law firm as a whole, for some jobs you want what Godin calls the factory worker or the day laborer: those who will just follow instructions and go by the book. For other positions, you want the linchpins, especially if the person has direct interaction with your clients. The linchpin takes charge – they see an opportunity and take it; they don't wait for one partner to answer questions or fix things.

Look critically at what happens in your law office every day. Much of it doesn't require a law degree or even any kind of advanced degree at all. The point of systematizing isn't to provide clients with cookie cutter services – it's exactly the opposite – to free you, as the entrepreneur, to provide something exceptional for your clients. To focus on what requires your specific skills, expertise or human touch. The more you can delegate down the line to be done automatically, inexpensively and quickly, the more efficient your practice can be, and the more time you can devote to being truly exceptional and providing an outstanding experience for your clients. Rather than wasting your time with mundane tasks that can be replicated, you can focus on what cannot be reproduced – human interaction.

Productivity is an important part in paving the way for innovation and connection to happen. As Godin says, "The point of being done is not to finish, but to get other things done." Improving productivity isn't just important so you can get more done in less time; it's weeding out the mundane tasks that can be automated or systematized so you can delegate them to someone else and focus on the stuff that requires YOU – the human element – the relationships and connections.

Godin admits that to be profitable, businesses must improve efficiency of the 'machine' and reduce costs. He notes that linchpins work in two ways:

1. Hire factory workers/scale. Take advantage of the fact that most people want a map – they don't want to be linchpins; instead, they want to be told what to do step by step. This is the cheap labor, the outsourced worker, or the parts of the job that can be automated
2. Find a boss (as a law firm, your 'boss' is your client) who cannot live without a linchpin, values your scarcity and contribution and will reward you with freedom and respect

Clearly, Godin isn't saying that as a business owner or entrepreneur, you shouldn't systematize. Rather, he says that if you want to be indispensable, you don't want to be the one doing the replicable tasks. Leave them to someone else. Instead, according to Godin, you should make yourself the linchpin – indispensable to your clients (and indispensable to your firm) by focusing on the real work that needs to be done: delighting clients and making the connections that matter. This requires removing as much 'busywork' and as many distractions as possible (Godin himself advises that he has eliminated his commute, meetings and other excuses – including locking himself out of the internet at certain times) so that you can focus.

### **Systematization + Innovation & Connection = Success**

**Bottom line:** Use Gerber's techniques to get away from the busywork, automate it and push it down to lower ranks of employees (or outsource it entirely) and take Godin's ideas to heart. Focus on the "real" work, on what makes you indispensable: interaction, connection, insight, seeing the reality of your firm and what it could be in the future, and on creating a real difference in the lives of your clients. Systematize and innovate.

***About the Author***

*Allison C. Shields, Esq., President of Legal Ease Consulting, Inc., is a former practicing attorney and law firm manager who helps law firms create more productive, profitable and enjoyable law practices by providing practice management and business development coaching and consulting. Contact her at [Allison@LegalEaseConsulting.com](mailto:Allison@LegalEaseConsulting.com), visit her website at [www.LawyerMeltdown.com](http://www.LawyerMeltdown.com) or her blog, [www.LegalEaseConsulting.com](http://www.LegalEaseConsulting.com).*

