

## WHITSUNDAY SHAPSHOT - 2006

*The following pieces of what started as a blog were written in the spring of May 2006, a year after I retired as managing partner of Buck & Gordon (B&G). I thought it would turn into a running blog, but three years later I recognize that it instead turned out to be a snap shot of reflections at one point in my legal career.*

*A year after writing these reflections things changed rather dramatically at B&G. I left in 2007 and the remaining partners formed GordonDerr. I cannot speak for their principles or values as they go forward. This is simply a reflection where I thought B&G was in the spring of 2006.*

*I have recently been asked by some law students how one creates a value driven firm and hold billable hours in check. This paper is a road map. It is one that was used for years at B&G and is now being carried on at my new firm, The Buck Law Group.*

### 1. Whitsunday Reflections

For four days in early May of 2006, I have been sitting out a weather change in Nara Inlet in the Whitsunday Islands on a 35 foot sailboat. We are waiting for a new system to develop and give us good sailing. Meanwhile I am using the early morning to reflect and write while listening to Channel 81, the "comedy channel" where we poor bareboat charterers call in to charter bases with our myriad of boat and navigation problems. It is a great place to reflect and write.

Having now completed a one year self imposed moratorium on dealing with management issues at Buck & Gordon ("B&G") I decided to set forth some of my thoughts on our culture, something I am proud of and would like to see sustained.

The concept of a blog seems ideal. I can be less formal and careful about what I say. I don't have to have the buy in of my partners or the firm as I would seek if this was going on the firm website. I can easily revise this from week to week as I get feedback or new insights.

From the above it should go without saying that this blog represents only my personal memory and my personal view of things.

### 2. "Rolling Purgatory"

In 1972 or 73 Roland Hjorth, a well respected tax professor at the University of Washington Law School, ended his last session of the year with a talk on what he termed "Rolling Purgatory." It surprised us at the time since it was so different than what we had dealt with all term. It was in the nature of a graduation address and has stayed in my mind until this day.

34 years later I am pretty sure the talk went like this:

You are all achievers in life or you would not be here. I want to warn you about one trap in life you may not have thought of. I call it "Rolling Purgatory."

You all worked hard in high school to have the grades and activities necessary to get into a good college. You worked very hard in college to get the grades necessary to be admitted to this law school. Most of you have worked very hard in law school so you can get a good first job. As you know, along the way you have sacrificed some things you would have rather been doing in life to achieve your success.

For those of you who go to private law firms it could continue as follows. You will become a young associate and work long, long hours to become a respected senior associate. Then when you are a senior associate you will work long long hours to make partner. Then as a junior partner you will work long long hours to become a successful mid level partner. Then you will work long long hours to become a more powerful and respected senior partner. This is the way people become successes as lawyers in private law firms. They work hard to get to what they perceive as heaven.

The problem is that just as you are enjoying the money and respect you have turned 45, you are overweight and unhealthy, you have an alcohol problem, your spouse has left you, your kids have grown to be teenagers and you forfeited the chance to participate in their growing up.

I suggest in the coming years you think before you sacrifice your health, your families, your communities, and your hobbies in the never ending quest for a more successful legal career. Don't condemn yourselves to "Rolling Purgatory." I believe you can be a success and keep the other parts of your life in tact.

I have always assumed that he ended all his classes that way. In the spring of this year at a PILA charity auction I ran into Ron. I told him how important that talk had been to me over the years. He expressed surprise; he did not remember the term "Rolling Purgatory" or the talk. We concluded it was a one time event. I was certainly lucky to be in that class at that time. I have never applied any of the tax law I learned. But that final talk was worth an entire term and more.

### **3. The Origin of the B&G Balanced Life Culture**

Recently having gotten back involved in recruiting and mentoring B&G's next wave of newer attorneys I have been asked lots of questions of the origin of our balanced life culture. Fortunately I know it all started with reading one specific chapter of one specific book which my father had recommended to me.

I read this book in the spring and summer of 1979. That was the period when I began to realize I needed to form my own law firm to achieve what I wanted in life.

Six years earlier, in 1973, I had graduated from law school and was fortunate enough to be the first associate to join a group of six young lawyers who had just formed their own firm. I was thrilled with the practice of law and of my own accord was working in excess of 2000 hours a year. It was exhilarating.

In 1976, after three years of practice, I became a junior partner. This gave me the opportunity and responsibility to focus on the new, wonderful young people we were hiring as associates. I realized that my views differed from those of most of my partners on what today we would call "corporate culture" issues.

In the fall of 1978, in what I now see as a grand irony, I wrote a four page memo to my partners about some changes I would like to have considered. I submitted this carefully drafted and personally produced (with lots of retyping, since I did not even have a memory typewriter) and submitted it to the managing partner. For six months the partners did what I thought was "stonewalling" me. I became discouraged and angry over the refusal to even consider what I so carefully proposed. Partner meeting after partner meeting they would not put this on the partnership's frequent partner meetings. None of them even acknowledged what I wrote. Eventually I decided there was no place for me in a partnership that refused to even discuss a junior partner's issues. So in the spring of 1978 I realized it was time to move on.

It was not until many years after I left that I realized that the managing partner at the time did not pass on my memo to the other partners. So I was not the victim of a refusal to confront issues, but simply in an atmosphere where management and communication were less than ideal. Of course 25 years later I realize that 50% of the problem was mine for not pushing harder to understand why I was being stonewalled. My timidity in partner communication was a problem. On the other hand, all concerned are much better off today as a result of my decision to move on. In that firm I would have been a troublesome partner. And B&G would not have come into existence and provide a nice place of permanent/temporary, full time/part time employment for what over the years totals over 125 people. Most of them tell me they benefited in some way from this employment, and I can see that most of them found a chance to grow and to have some fun.

Back to the spring of 1979. As I was reaching a decision to start or join a firm I read a book my father had recommended: How to Get Control of Your Time and Your Life, by Alan Laekin. The book is on the market and available through Amazon for a pittance. Any reader who would like a wake up call on what is important and not important in life should read and do the exercises in Chapter Five. To do it well, allocate 1 hour, start at the beginning of the chapter and work

straight through. Do not skip ahead. Other parts of the book were meaningful for me; this was my introduction to the 80-20 rule which has served me well in life. I stress Chapter Five, however, since it can give life changing insight to some.

Suffice it to say that in the summer of 1979 I did a lot of examination as to what was important in my life. One thing that was important that I not have my life consumed with work to the exclusion of my family, my health, or my enjoyment of out door sports. I deliberately set out to lead a professional life that did not lead to the exclusion of other parts of my life. The ground work for that had perhaps been laid with a stunning end of the year law school talk on Rolling Purgatory that is described elsewhere.

Based on egalitarian values, I also sought to have a work atmosphere where others also had balance in their lives. I was not comfortable with the idea that I would be off skiing or sailing and my work colleagues would always be working. And I was not comfortable during recruiting telling new associates that they would have a balanced life if indeed I was going to even subtly allow or encourage them to work 1800 hours. And I did not want to have a group of burned out colleagues.

"Corporate Culture" was not an articulated term in those days, but that is what was being planned. I started my own law firm and was 100% responsible for what we did right or wrong. There was no passing the Buck.

From the start B&G was fortunate to hire people who either shared those values or quickly embraced them. The early employees are still with us and reinforce our culture every day. Pat McShea came on board as secretary/bookkeeper/receptionist/office manager one month before I even officially opened the firm. Pat has been with us for 27 years and is our loyal bookkeeper and keeper of our legends. Joel Gordon, fresh out of law school and a recent bar admittee, joined us one month after we started. Joel has also been with us 27 years and is a rock solid foundation of the firm's culture. The next year Julie Brandsness joined us fresh out of Saint Olaf as an undergraduate, the first week she arrived in Seattle. For years she has been our executive director and is so respected by her peers that she is on the international board of the Association of Legal Administrators. She has been a powerful force to see that we walk the talk vis a vis non-timekeeper staff. Jay Derr, Amy Kosterlitz and Brent Carson were the next attorneys to join us, all more than 20 years ago. All soon had young children and quickly embraced and enhanced the culture. Our great partners since then have also shared these values.

When it is offered, everyone buys into this culture. As associates who have worked other firms join us, they sometimes worry about a cut in pay. Our standard response is that if they work the same hours they have been they will make as much or more than at any firm in town. I know one or two of them thought they might keep up the hours they had

been working. Immediately, however, they gravitated to what is a 1600 hour pace. When left to control their own destinies, not one of them has decided that the extra money is as important at the other parts of their lives.

An interesting side bar is that in all the 27 years only one lawyer in our firm has been divorced. This is an aberrational statistic and in part is a result of us having had the space in life to pay attention to our family life. The one exception, was me and I am still close friends with my first wife and her husband and their daughter, in part because I had the time and mental space to protect that relationship.

Our culture will most likely be sustained for three reasons. It makes sense. The people we hire embrace it. It is institutionalized and supported by structures. [A surprising fact three years later (2009) as I write this is that the values as I understood them were not rock solid when some restive newer partners saw things from a different perspective. This led to my leaving and starting again with the Buck Law Group (BLG) where I get to use my 36 years of practice to start again.) I believe an egalitarian, balanced life style firm can provide excellent service to clients and thrive.]

First and foremost this culture can be sustained because it makes sense. The people we hire have lives. They have families. They have friends. They have sports. They have hobbies. They like to take care of their health. They want to participate in their communities. They don't want to burn out with stress. They want the time to take care of the emergencies in life. Because we are fiscally conservative and have a never ending supply of great clients, we make enough money. So we can have our cake and eat it too.

Secondly, all of the newer attorneys, who will be our partners, managers and leaders in the future embrace this culture. We seek highly talented young people that are sought out by all the top firms in the country. Since we are limited in the substantive areas we practice, we are at a competitive disadvantage. Our strong competitive edge is that we are one of the premier firms in the country for those that want to practice very high quality law, but also want to avoid the destructive forces of consistently putting in 1800 hours a year. This means that more and more we are attracting top notch people who fully understand and appreciate our culture. They can see the tremendous benefits in their lives and egalitarian enough to believe in extending the cultural benefits to all employees.

Finally, structures such as compensation schemes, reimbursement policies, client selection criteria, personnel procedures, benefit schemes, sabbatical and vacation plans, team work incentives, etc. have been put in place which reinforce these values.

#### **4. Inquiring young lawyers often ask: "How can a balanced life firm work economically?"**

An underpinning of most successful law firms is that they provide excellent service to their clients. That includes knowing the client's goals, constantly striving to achieve those goals in a timely fashion, being good communicators, showing loyalty. If the service is provided, all else can follow. I stress this at the outset, since no one should assume that balanced lives come first. Serving our clients must always come first.

Having said that let me describe how I think the economics have worked for B&G.

Most important is that there is a commitment at the partner level to value a balanced life for all employees. In the private practice of law, a lot of the pressure to work long hours and to cause associates to work long hours comes from partners that feel they need to have lots of money. Uniformly B&G partners believe we do not need to drive Porches or Mercedes. We do not need to go to the most expensive restaurants in town. We do not need to own a vacation condominium in Sun Valley. We believe the well respected sociological studies that show that large incomes do not lead to any improvement in levels of happiness or health. So we start with a culture that is modest in demands.

This is not to say that we have taken vows of poverty. Partners send their children to excellent colleges. We take nice vacations, we generously donate to charity, and we live in nice homes. And when one takes into account the ratio of hours we work to our income, the lack of work related stress in our lives, the joy we take in having happy and well rounded employees, and the time for families and friends, we live very handsomely.

The key to the economic equation is that we handle highly sophisticated matters in a successful and efficient manner. This allows us to bill top rates. It means our clients pay in a timely fashion. And based on our success we have plenty of work without having to spend much money or time on marketing. So for the hours we work we get good rates and a high realization. And we get lots of repeat business and referrals from our clients.

A second important component is that over the years we have been fiscally conservative. We buy rather than lease. We pay cash rather than take out loans. We maintain a strong cash position rather than take out a line of credit. We get good but not opulent space by shrewd timing and negotiation. (Thanks for 25 years of brilliance, Joel.) We contemplate and plan and head off disasters. We have incredibly low turnover at all levels and avoid the costs of replacing and training employees or paying out departing partners for their capital. As a consequence our overall cost of doing business is relatively modest.

Bottom line: If partners do not demand lots of income, if clients are well served, and if a firm is careful fiscally, it can work economically very well with an average billable hour goal of 1600 hours.

**5. Inquiring lawyers, particularly potential lateral recruits, ask:  
"How do your clients deal with a balanced life firm? What happens when  
they call Friday afternoon with a crisis?"**

Our clients care about continual achievement of their goals. And that always comes first for us. They do not care if we are not working until 8:00 pm or are not working on Saturday and Sunday. They do not care if we close the office early on a nice summer afternoon. They know we will get their work done on time and within budget. And they know that we can usually get them a successful result at the least price possible.

We hire the best attorneys. We train our new attorneys. We work as a team to generate ideas and support. We constantly remember that achieving our clients' goals is the touchstone of our professional life. This shows up in results. That is what our clients care about.

Over time we have come to have a group of clients that do not expect that their self generated emergencies will result in us bailing them out weekend after weekend. We either train them to avoid constant emergencies or we help them transition to another law firm. Over the years our client base has been deliberately upgraded on a number of criteria. This is one of them.

We will work 15 hours a day, 7 days a week if that is what is needed to achieve our client's goal. All of our attorneys know how to put in incredible efforts. Indeed we all thrive on the adrenaline rush and excitement of the occasional big push. And we have families who know that this is what is sometimes needed. We have just chosen not to have the big push week after week and month after month. In emergencies our families are supportive since in the big picture they benefit so much from our balanced life culture. To the best of my knowledge, in 26 years, no other law firm has ever gained an advantage over one of our clients by outworking us. Often they bill a lot more hours than us, they rarely if ever out brief or out think us. That is what clients care about.

Bottom line. Our clients care about winning, not about whether their attorneys lead balanced lives. And we thrive on winning.

## 6. Just Say "No"

When I came out of another law firm in 1979 I believed that we had been causing associates to work longer hours than I had represented in recruiting.

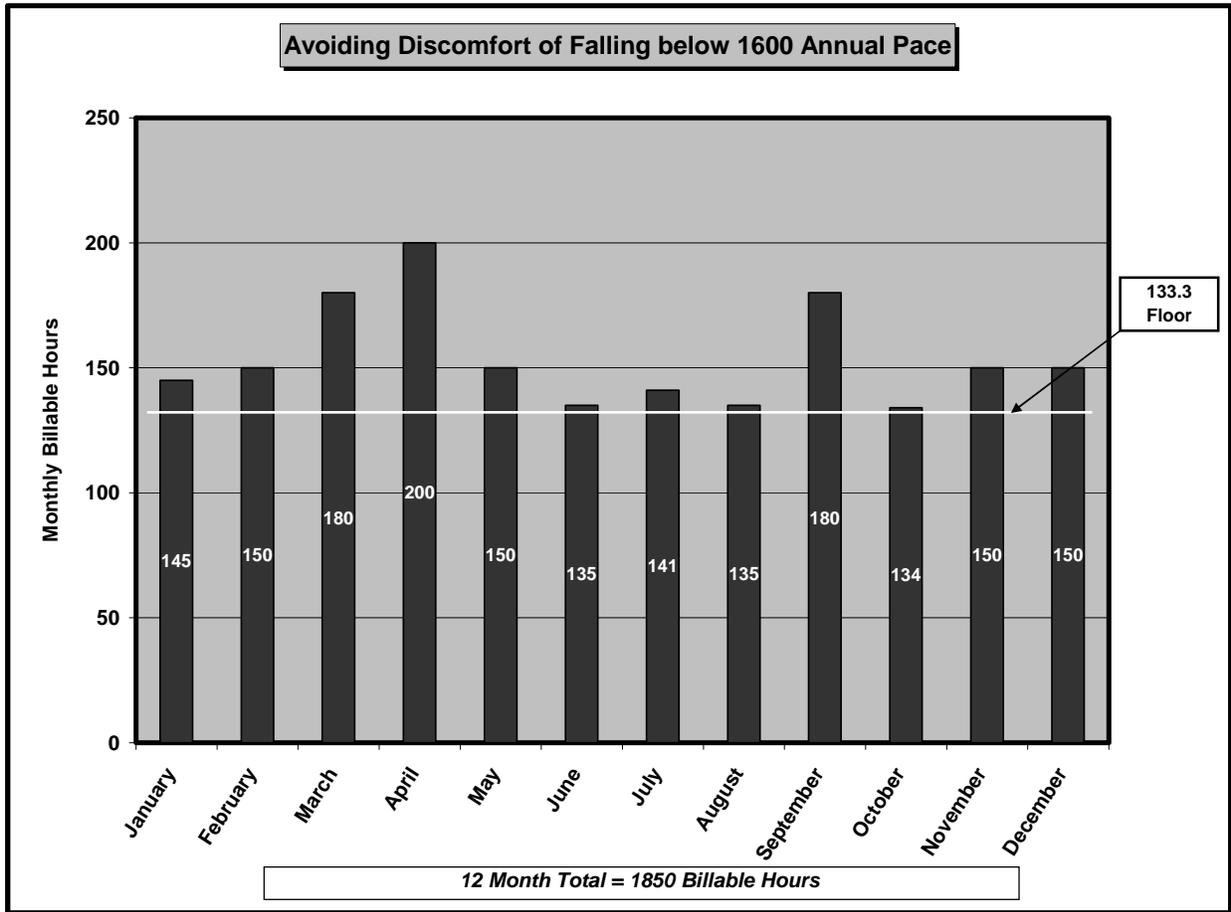
I knew my partners were not mal-intentioned. I realized that the problem instead came from partners that could not say "no" to potential new clients. They would take on new clients with demanding matters and before long the associates were working 1900+ hours a year to service these clients which had been generated by someone else..

From the first day of my new practice I realized that a successful firm which would attract a constant supply of potential new clients had to exercise self control to resist the temptation to always say "yes." Accordingly B&G has almost always restrained itself from taking on too much work.

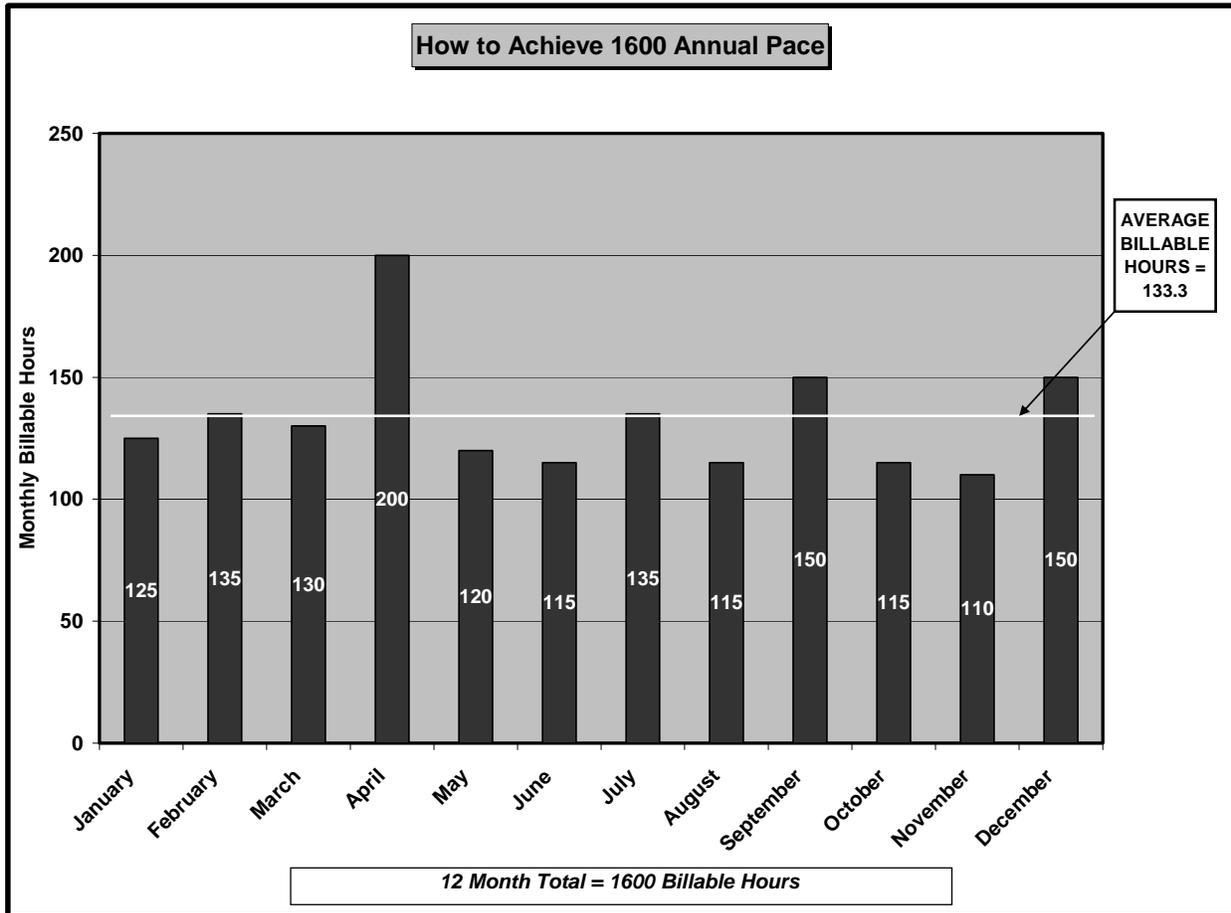
Saying "no" to good work means facing the demon of the uncertainty of whether there will be future work when things slow down. Since about fifty percent of our work is transactional in areas such as litigation, major real estate acquisition, major one-time permitting, etc, we often can not look into the future 6 month and see what will keep us busy. In the early days it took some courage to say "no," not knowing if the work would be there in 6 months. But I knew we had to, and all the subsequent partners have come to embrace that idea. And amazingly, in 27 years there has always been work 6 months later. Like all firms we have our ebbs and flows of business, but it always seems to come when we need it.

In conceptualizing this in the earlier years I used to draw charts on a napkin. They illustrated the problems that every successful law firm will face if it wants to contain its work load. The key issue is that to achieve 1600 hours on an annual basis, there will be months where that month's pace of hours will have to be less than 1600 hours. 1600 hours will be exceeded on an annual basis if it is treated as a floor from month to month.

What occurs when one avoids the discomfort of dropping below a 1600  
pace in any month



The effects of saying "no" even though some months may be slow



An unexpected but beneficial result of keeping our hours in check by saying "no" to some potential new clients is that we always have had the capacity to devote huge efforts for our clients if they need it. Like all lawyers, we love the adrenaline rush of the client crisis. We can put in 15 hours, seven days a week when needed. With our long term maintenance of work loads we can always be responsive to our existing clients. They love it.

Bottom line: A firm has to accept the discomfort of saying "no" to potential new clients, if those new clients will exceed the firm's capacity to stay within its goals. This will at the same time preserve the capacity to serve the peaks of existing clients' work.

#### **7. Does B&G Really Have a 1600 Hours Requirement?**

For years we have said we had a 1600 hours requirement. In the fall of 2005 we prominently featured this in a recruiting ad for a real estate associate. We began to hear that at least one law firm in town was telling potential recruits and their associates that this could not be true.

It is true. All of our associates and former associates will attest to this. [Again, please note that as I resurface this paper two years after I left B&G, I cannot speak for them.]

As a routine matter, like most firms, we keep monthly and annual statistics on billable hours. In preparing this blog item I reviewed the original statistics kept in the ordinary course of business for the ten year period encompassing 1996 through 2005.

For associates these hours were not just "billable." The recorded associate hours also include what we term "partner assigned non billable hours" which include things where the associate has no choice to put in the hours: helping on CLE's, helping on pro-bono matters a partner has taken, etc.

The average billable hours for partners and billable plus partner assigned "non-billable assigned" hours for associates are combined as follows. At no point did either the average partner or average associate hours exceed 1600 per year. [If any seriously interested people want to visit me I would share these statistics with names removed to protect the innocent.]

At no time has there been any additional associate's requirement for activities such as marketing, pro bono, community involvement, etc. Our associates participate in such activities if they want. B&G partners have always chosen not to mandate this aspect of our associate's lives.

With a stated requirement of 1600 hours, we could still get the average up to 1800 hours. If anything, that would be the normal state of affairs with lots of good clients with good matters. Young associates have lots of energy and are sharp enough to pick up subtle clues. We could just pile on the work and any conscientious associate will do it. We could praise them each month they billed lots of hours. We could pay periodic bonuses when the hours were up. From time to time we could make it seem like vacations were not in the best interest of our clients. We are smart enough to know how to subtly encourage more than 1600 hours. And we know that those extra billings would result in almost pure profit, since most of our expenses are not variable. We have decided, with clear articulation, however, that the partnership will avoid any actions which would undermine the 1600 hours goal.

Let me conclude with the same caveat that is elsewhere in this blog. Our first rationale for existing professionally is to serve our clients well in a timely fashion. When a client needs us 15 hours a day for 7 days, we will step up to the plate. This is a peak. But we do not let there be such peaks month after month for anyone. This is what results in an annual average.

Bottom line. Our hours' statements are true. Those firms that find it unbelievable either do not understand that partners can be happy making less money, or have firms that are overextended on the expense side or have partners that are comfortable exploiting those that work for them.

## 8. Summary of Buck & Gordon Culture Email Responses

As I prepared my blog and thought about our culture I realized the best source of input was from our attorneys and staff. So I asked them how they would articulate the culture. I prompted them to answer the question "What are the unique characteristics that seem to stand out about B&G as a firm or as a group of people?"

The following are the unedited responses: [Again, note these are comments from 2006].

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I love to come to work. I had to stop and ponder this for awhile. I feel it is because of the healthy culture of B&G. The emphasis placed on balanced in one's life, work, family and home. Mentally B&G has an atmosphere of challenge, an openness to train, and keep training both staff and attorneys. There is always a sense of equality given to the importance of each position held at B&G. And, of course, the emphasis places on staying healthy and the encouragement of peers to do so. So that is why I love to come to work.

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Everyone is treated equally and with respect and genuine concern. There is a "family" attitude among employees. The atmosphere is relaxed and full of humor but quality is still important. Each employee is regarded and treated as important. The level of intelligence is superior to many firms I've worked for and it is not flaunted. I am compensated generously for my work.

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While I have always dreamed of working at a company like Buck & Gordon, I was never really convinced such a place existed until I arrived here. I have never worked at a place before (and I've worked at several places in my 40 years of employment) where what I said and thought mattered to everyone. Everyone, from staff to attorneys, is treated equally with respect, affection and professionalism. My whole well-being from emotional to physical is important to the company. As an example, the firm promotes physical fitness with financial support for the cost of belonging to the Seattle Athletic Club and that is just one way in which my life has changed with the loss of weight and increased strength and endurance which has transcended into my personal life with more sporting activities at a higher level of performance. The end result is a happy employee who enjoys coming to work, strives for outstanding performance and is grateful for the

opportunity to contribute to the success of Buck & Gordon--a company that cares.

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Although this is my first full-time occupation, I have worked (part-time) in numerous diverse work environments, some good, some great, some not so great. I usually find it easy to articulate the work environment that I am immersed in and why I do or do not like it, but describing Buck & Gordon and the culture that is fostered here is a little more challenging. Unique would be an extremely understated definition of what you find in the Buck & Gordon office. From the first day that I stepped foot in the Buck & Gordon lobby I was welcomed. The eclectic group of people and personalities that make up Buck & Gordon don't clash; rather they all seem to complement each other. There is a very intangible, hard to describe comfort and ease in the way that we all interact, whether it be at the copier machine, wine Friday, or passing each other in the halls. Prior to working at Buck & Gordon, I had a preconceived notion that law firms were stuffy, hierarchical, boring, and humdrum, but Buck & Gordon has derailed those notions completely. There is whistling in the halls, laughing in the kitchen, gathering for birthday cake celebrations in the Boardroom, e-mailing of exciting firm achievements, and sharing of stories. In referring to the group of people who make up the firm we consistently label ourselves as the "Buck & Gordon Team" and that is what I feel like, an integral part of a collaborative, fun, hard working team.

I have been impressed with the value that Buck & Gordon consistently places on those things that are not directly related to the firm: family, friends, hobbies, traveling . . . the list goes on and on. Although a law firm, Buck & Gordon does not sacrifice the fun, important, healthy parts of a balanced life in the pursuit to provide top notch service to their clients, there is a middle ground and that is where the firm stands. Words can't quite capture what makes Buck & Gordon unique because there is no comparison, Buck & Gordon is truly one of a kind.

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The main characteristic that stands out to me is openness. People at B&G are open to communication (walk in the door, pick up the phone, send an e-mail), new ideas, new experiences, new ways of doing work and new ways of having fun. People at B&G are also open to caring about each other, and to expressing the fact that they care. Other important characteristics include balance (we try to live balanced lives), sincerity and good humor.

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I have an interesting position in the firm. I am neither fish nor fowl in the partner-associate ranks, but still feel very comfortable in the niche that I occupy. When I describe my job to people, the general conclusion is that I have the best job on earth. I love what I do,

and it gives me great psychic satisfaction. The economics seem to work well, both for me and for the firm. We have interesting, challenging work, and some of what I like to do best (closings) is what others like least. It is a great fit, and possible only because of the incredible flexibility of Buck & Gordon (and maybe me) in making it work.

People here recognize both that everyone is vitally important, and that no one is irreplaceable. That is an exceedingly unusual combination, because in that, we value the contribution that each person makes, but realize that when a person is not here, we can help to manage their work and their clients for a time without them. I think this is what makes it possible for people to take sabbaticals, work remotely (even from Wisconsin), and take blocks of time off. I do not know of anywhere else that has that balance, or accommodates the needs of their human capital in a way that does not include competitiveness, anger, jealousy, and rancor. I have not seen those negative traits in play here, and I believe that is partly why Buck & Gordon employees are satisfied, helpful, and loyal.

Buck and Gordon also "gets it" that people do very well with positive reinforcement and respectful treatment. That shows in lots of little ways, particularly in staff recognition, and makes it easier for everyone to come to work every day. I expect Julie deserves a lot of credit for that awareness and those actions. And I know that, even if they are someone else's idea, management has the great good sense to take the advice of the people they hire for advice. Even that is unusual in other firms.

So, that is my observation on the culture at Buck & Gordon.

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Here are two paragraphs that come immediately to mind. Lots of other things as well, but these are at the top of my mind today:

1. Incredibly supportive -- trying to make the practice of law work for everyone. The difference at B&G is that folks do this because they care for each other as human beings, not to try to make more money, get more "credit" or get "points" in any other way. There are many examples -- a couple of recent ones that come to mind: your jumping on the real estate associate -- Joel and Aliza are frayed, and clearly need help quickly. You didn't question that need, just jumped on filling it. Adam's work on arranging workloads with Aliza to free her up short term and organizing a process to reach a conclusion about how to deal with the longer term issues. Everyone's incredible support taking over things for me while I get ready to head out on sabbatical -- not just watching things, but agreeing to do it in a way that is allowing me to bill time until I leave. Or getting matters to me to work on until I leave (like you did with Parsons). Jay's hours spent on the firm as managing partner. There are many, many other examples, but the overall "theme" is support for each other.

2. An incredibly talented group of professionals that play well together. I have spent the last two days with Adam, Tadas and Molly at the mid-year (and also at a couple of client meetings here in Ocean Shores and on the way to Ocean Shores). Molly did a presentation today that was fabulous. Adam was implicitly recognized by Jay Manning (new Ecology head) in a keynote presentation last night as "the" water rights attorney. Mild mannered Tadas, who has been practicing for less than 3 years, knows probably half the people in the room pretty well. And, in addition to the clear talent, the four of us closed down the bar last night, having a great time telling stories and laughing. I think everyone at this conference wishes they worked at Buck & Gordon. You would be proud.

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To me the key aspect of our firm culture is respect. We respect the work and contributions of our staff and of our fellow timekeepers. We respect the choices individuals make to lead a full life inside and outside the office. We respect each others opinions in meeting the goals of our clients. We respect efforts that each partner makes in bringing in new clients and in managing the work of these clients.

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Unique in the way it maintains a high level of professionalism and success, while encouraging its employees to live balanced lives and not take themselves too seriously. B&G recognizes the importance of family and friends, health, hobbies and travel. B&G consistently takes the road less traveled, whether its advertising, the firm's business model (billable hours, employee benefits), or even the way the firm chooses to approach certain legal issues. Because of this approach, the firm has created a positive workplace with low turnover and talented employees. (One wonders why more firms don't try it...)

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Everyone is treated equally and with respect and genuine concern. There is a "family" attitude among employees. The atmosphere is relaxed and full of humor but quality is still important. Each employee is regarded and treated as important. The level of intelligence is superior to many firms I've worked for and it is not flaunted. I am compensated generously for my work.

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One of the more unique qualities about Buck & Gordon, is the level of quality communication that exists on all levels. Until now, I had never worked for a company where clear and concise communication was not just expected, but also reciprocated. I believe that has a lot to do with the overall morale of any company, and it would explain why the morale here at Buck & Gordon is through the roof!

I am constantly amazed that I have yet to hear one person complain about their job. Whenever I enter into a conversation with one of my co-workers regarding work, it always centers around how thankful and blessed we are to be a part of such a wonderful team. More importantly, for the first time in my life, I feel as if the company I work for is spurring me on to be the most healthy, balanced person I can possibly be. And that is truly priceless.

Thank you!

And as a side note:

As a result of our wonderful SAC benefits, I am going to realize my dream of competing in a fitness competition! I begin my training soon, and plan to compete within the next year. The resources that we have at our disposal are amazing, and they make it that much more possible for me to reach my goals!

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thoughts on one aspect of the B&G culture - not a comprehensive statement:

People at Buck & Gordon make unusual choices about the business of practicing law, even when the choices sometimes mean passing up growth or higher profits. Everyone at Buck & Gordon wants the firm to be financially successful, but we make decisions every day - about providing benefits to people who work here, about potential new business, about what to expect of the people who work here - that we might not make if we thought mostly about profits, growth and the related issues that preoccupy people at many other law firms. Time has shown that the Buck & Gordon model works, and that many lawyers and staff from other kinds of firms are attracted to Buck & Gordon because they want to make similar choices.

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I think Buck & Gordon's culture is very professional in a casual atmosphere. Everyone is respected as an important team member and creatively contributes to producing excellent work product while enjoying good humor and fun camaraderie. Our office culture is also sensitive and compassionate - quick to notice, to acknowledge, to congratulate, to care. It's like family.

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1. We value BOTH high quality hard work and also the "non-work" aspects of each of our employee's lives as important parts of what enriches them as people and makes them more successful as employees: (lower billing targets; job sharing opportunities; strong benefits program; flex time and telecommuting; Seattle Athletic Club; firm support of volunteer and pro-bono activities; etc)
  2. We respect absolutely everyone on the team at B&G---each plays an important role to our success and to our clients' success. We seek to

find ways for every employee to find personal satisfaction in his or her job--opportunities for personal growth; opportunities for valuable contribution to the project or client matter; opportunities for increasing responsibility.

3. We function as a team--encouraging and supporting each other
4. We try to have fun in the midst of sometime high-pressure demands
5. We are nimble and flexible--able to take advantage of opportunities when they arise; whether expected or not; whether scheduled or not.
6. We encourage creativity and new ideas to get the job done.
7. We are inclusive in our decision-making.

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The Buck & Gordon firm culture begins with Respect: The attorneys respect each other and the staff; the staff respects each other and the attorneys. We recognize our mutual talents and that we need each other in order to do quality work.

Next comes Acceptance: We acknowledge that not everyone works in the same way, thinks in the same way, or lives their lives in the same way, but we don't judge. Our differences enhance our ability to empathize, understand, and assist each other and our clients.

Last but not least is an old-fashioned Sense of Decency: We are kind to each other. We genuinely care for and about each other. We celebrate work victories and life achievements. We are interested in each other's lives.

And we laugh together - a lot! - because we know how fortunate we are and because life is too short to not enjoy it.

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For me the culture is summed up in two words:  
People first.

Whether that be clients or employees, that is how it feels to me. The sense of teamwork is beyond any I have ever experienced. Every employee has a voice in the firm and is given a chance to be heard. Pete, people still do not believe me when I explain to them the type of company I work for. Invariably, the question is, "You work for a LAW firm, right?" You truly created something unique here.

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Here are my thoughts: Buck & Gordon is a culture that combines a friendly and engaging yet very serious, get-down-to-business, client-oriented law practice with that rare quality of accommodating and supporting the personal needs and lifestyles of a variety of personalities and ages within its employee ranks. This creates a most admirable bridge between B&G's demand and respect for quality work--and its support and respect for personal family life, health, and overall well-being. B&G's benefits are generous and creative and include an atmosphere of acknowledgement that is uniquely 'life'-affirming in a corporate setting. One of the outstanding qualities of the firm as an

entity is its willingness and capacity to self-evaluate in an ongoing effort to maintain its vision and integrity while experiencing growth and change.

All of the above would be great under any circumstances but the frosting on the cake is B&G's unique blend of humor, creative problem solving, widely diverse personalities, exquisite location, scope of individual talent and intelligence, and its wonderful ability to transition from nose-to-the-grindstone dedication to 'let's have some fun and relaxation' without loss of purpose.

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To me the key aspect of our firm culture is respect. We respect the work and contributions of our staff and of our fellow timekeepers. We respect the choices individuals make to lead a full life inside and outside the office. We respect each others opinions in meeting the goals of our clients. We respect efforts that each partner makes in bringing in new clients and in managing the work of these clients.

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re my thoughts about what makes B&G a special place.

1. Character and credentials of the people - we have a group of people who appreciate the culture that exists; many have been in other firms and recognize the positive aspects of our culture; we hire people with excellent credentials and good cultural fit
  2. Foundation of respect - people are treated with respect and included as part of the team; staff are given credit and recognized for their role along with timekeepers
  3. Strong sense of community - people enjoy one another, which is evident in our social gatherings, etc.; we tune into people's person lives and support and celebrate what is happening in their lives; people work out together - Corporate fitness program; other side of community is giving back to the community in a variety of ways such as the Thanksgiving card program
  4. Quality of the work - product/service is top notch; people go the extra mile for the client
  5. Sense of fun - people have fun working hard together; excellent sense of team
  6. Generosity - people are paid well - both in compensation and benefits and recognized for their extra efforts; instituted staff sabbatical policy
  7. Work/life balance - important cornerstone of the firm for people to work hard and then go home and do what's important to them
  8. Family-family environment - people are given flexibility to incorporate their family responsibilities into their day, as needed; supportive maternity/paternity leave policy
  9. Unified firm mission - firm as a whole is generally moving in the same direction, which is a result of good leadership
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There are many more, but these are what strike me as the unique aspects of our culture.

One of the more important aspects of our culture even before I officially went to work at B&G I came early on my first day as substitute receptionist and couldn't find a way to enter the premises as it was apparently all locked up!

After a few minutes, a lady appeared who took me under her wing and showed me the back entrance so I could get in. That was all she had to do, but she did more. She got me all set up at the front desk and showed me where to find items that would be helpful throughout the day.

Linda Lightfoot demonstrated an important cultural aspect of the firm: not only helping someone in need, but going over and beyond minimal standards. An interesting spin off is that there is no class distinction between helper and helpee; attorneys help staff and vice versa when necessary. Sometimes a plea for aid is necessary; but often there is volunteering when someone appears stressed or in a quandary.

Linda Brown and Linda Lightfoot both take the initiative to let other staff know when they have completed their regular tasks and are available to help others. When people walk by the front desk with material there to be distributed, they will often take the items to the person's desk because they enjoy being helpful, not because they have to.

Not only am I aware of staff helping staff by anticipating needs, it appears that the attorneys often meet with each other to pick each other's brains regarding areas of expertise; it is a welcome exchange of ideas and not just because it is out of a sense of duty/obligation.

An interesting tangent of this theme is our food and drink policy - many firms only provide a minimum amount of drink with a refrigerator for lunches. But here at B&G, not only are many liquid refreshments provided, but healthy snacks as well which emphasizes the firm's commitment to staff well being. The company not only verbally encourages good health, but provides a second incentive of paying 80% of gym costs!

So, not only do people help people one on one, but there's also the second mile help of providing things that aid a person's

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B&G culture - this really demonstrates one of the things I truly appreciate about B&G's culture. Not only does everyone here in the office consider and treat each other as "family", actions like this are constantly being taken by individuals within the firm to recognize and support our "extended family".

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I haven't work in many places, however one reason I really appreciate this firm is the "outside of the box" thinking and the creative ideas that I see - they really make this place very unique and special.

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Buck & Gordon is a place where everyone is valued. Everyone's opinions are heard and respected - it doesn't matter whether you are a legal assistant, file clerk, planner, or attorney.

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In my view, the characteristic that stands out among folks at Buck and Gordon is respect for each other. This is a place where everyone is recognized for their positive contributions to the firm. As a result, it is a place where people feel appreciated and are happy to work. Unlike other places where extra effort may go unnoticed, it seems like the people at this firm are always ready to say thank you. In addition to respect for each other's work, the folks here respect and value each other's personal lives outside of work. This creates a positive and caring culture at B&G.

*[Post Note:*

*Those comments came from the heart in 2006. They are real reflections of the thoughts of real people in a top notch firm with a total of 50 employees. For those future practitioners who thinks this sounds good, I encourage you to make it happen. In the words of the tag line of my favorite law firm: "Just Get it Done."*

*Monday, September 07, 2009*

*Pete Buck]*