Owning a firm is fun: You set rules

By: MARIA MALLORY
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Kevin Abel wanted out.

He and his wife, Cindy, had worked several years as consultants, and they had enough of the corporate grind.

Like many workers in corporate America, Kevin Abel found a lot he didn't like in the ways of Big Business.

If you've felt like a tiny fish swept along in the riptide of corporate culture, you probably know what the Abels were feeling. Abel thought he could do better working for himself, making his work life more meaningful and less intrusive on his home life.

"I always knew that I wanted to start my own company," Abel said. "It was just a matter of time and a matter of figuring out what we were going to do and what kind of company we were going to form."

They formed Abel Solutions Inc. in February 1997. The Abels developed a business doing Web design and helping corporate and government organizations tap the Internet for ways to make marketing, communication and other processes more efficient.

"We decided our value-added was going to be to build business applications that harnessed the power of the Web," Abel said.

Healthy Projects

They set out to build a firm that would be free of the corporate problems and workplace frustrations they had complained about.

High on the Abels' list of better management technique was avoiding aborted projects.

"I had worked five or six multimillion-dollar projects that never saw the light of day," Kevin Abel recalled. "That's just a reality

LOUIE FAVORITE / Staff

Frustrated by corporate America, Kevin Abel and his wife founded Abel Solutions Inc. in 1997. The company handles Web design and helps companies use the Net better.

of the corporate world. A lot of initiatives get started for the wrong reasons or don't have enough support or sponsorship high up enough in the corporation, reasons that have nothing to do with the technical capability or the quality of the people involved."

As president and owner of ASI, Abel said, he is directly involved in some aspect of all the work the firm takes on. "Our first project was a $10,000 project," he said. "We did everything from initiating the software to building the solution to seeing it go live on the Internet. It was great."

Today, Alpharetta-based ASI employs 21 people. Last year's sales topped $2 million, "and our goal is $3.5 million this year," Kevin Abel said. But even as the company has grown over the years, he said, "I have a personal stake in all that we do, and every project we've ever worked on goes from beginning to end."

In the process, Abel said, he has attacked another aspect of corporate life that used to irk him — typecasting. Too often, he said, employees of large companies are boxed in by their job titles and descriptions. Workers with limited functions to perform have limited opportunity to stretch and grow, he said.

Abel's solution at ASI: Give people responsibilities they may not even realize they can handle —

"without letting them fall" by supplying mentors, support and resources.

A recent hire is a case in point. Although she was employed as a programmer, Abel has tapped the young Georgia Tech grad to be project manager on a job. "Every project needs a project manager, no matter how small," he explained. "Every project doesn't need a project manager with 15 years of experience."

By tackling work that stretches the employee beyond programming, Abel said, she will end up with experience that otherwise could take her years to acquire in a traditional corporate setting.

Abel hopes offering such opportunities at work will make work more meaningful for his employees and more fun, which was another of his goals as an entrepreneur intent on reforming the workplace.

Avoiding overtime

And while the work must get

done, Abel said he is committed to avoiding the common consulting and entrepreneurial trap of "all work and no play," not only for himself but his employees.

"The average overtime for anyone over the course of the year is maybe five or 10 hours at the absolute maximum," he said. "From the consulting work we came from, it was expected that you work 60- to 80-hour weeks. It's all about billable hours."

Now that he's running his own company, "we just tell people that our expectation is not that they work 60 hours a week. If a project requires another 20 hours a week, we just allocate another person."

Excessive travel was a problem Abel wanted to address as well. At ASI, he has tried to keep travel to a minimum. "We try very hard to do most of our work in Atlanta. We have a 25 percent travel policy, if needed, but there hasn't been a need."

Only one employee makes regular trips to New York on a client project, Abel said. So he's happy with his efforts to help his employees balance their work and private lives.

"We believe in balance. My wife and I had one child when we started the business. We have three now," he said.

"I know I hate to travel, even if for one day, leaving the kids, the family, the household.

"We believe strongly in balance for ourselves and everybody involved."

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TRY THESE ONLINE STARTING POINTS
A few links to online self-assessments that may help you determine if you've got what it takes to go out on your own.

- From a site billed as "the smart woman's online career resource":
  www.career-intelligence.com/assessment/personality/ entrepreneurs_checklist.htm
- Is franchising for you? **www.ownafranchise.com/self_test.html**
- From the "Internet portal for entrepreneurs": **new.innonet.ch/ all_active/sp_e/info/startup/utest_form.asp**