



**BUSINESS**

## Irvine firm matches employers with workers, operating almost entirely online

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Kim Shepherd, a former journalist, runs Decision Toolbox, a company that finds workers for employers. NICK AGRO, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

**By JODIE TILLMAN / STAFF WRITER**

Kim Shepherd worked as an entertainment journalist for a decade before she decided to take a break from the stress and travel.

“So I joined Club Med as their director of entertainment,” she said. “The biggest decision was white or red.”

But the hard-charging former high school debate champ and onetime Olympic ski team hopeful couldn't stay poolside for long. She began working as a corporate recruiter and eventually became CEO of Irvine-based Decision Toolbox, which finds workers for employers ranging from discount retail chains to defense contractors. The company operates almost entirely virtually; her personal assistant lives in Atlanta.

“What I wanted to do here was build the right company. I want my people to not want to leave,” she says.

Shepherd, who is single but in a relationship, moved to Laguna Beach in 1996 because she was drawn to the gay scene. She insists her employees have lives outside of the office – they aren’t allowed to answer work-related emails while on vacation – and she has plenty to keep herself busy, too. She serves on the board of Costa Mesa-based Working Wardrobes, which provides career services to abused women and other people facing challenges.

She co-wrote two books, “The Bite Me School of Management” and “Get Scrappy.” She’s plotting an upcoming trip to South Africa. And she always makes time for a morning phone call: Her 80-year-old mother reads the celebrity birthdays in the newspaper, and Shepherd and her sister try to guess the ages.

**My neighborhood:** Laguna Beach

**Why I live here:** It’s such a close sense of community. Even though there are a tremendous number of tourists, I like going to the restaurants and knowing the dishwasher’s name and the manager’s name. I go to the local Taco Bell, and I’m a regular.

**My favorite restaurant:** Sushi Laguna. Yellow-tail, fireroll ... their food is great.

**My perfect day:** Skiing in Big Bear. I have a cabin up there. I like when the storm is coming. I grab my dog and run up there. I get snowed in, intentionally. The storm stops, I make a sandwich, put it down my bra, get on the slopes. (I eat the sandwich when I’m on the chairlift.)

**My favorite store that’s not a chain:** The Hanger Boutiques (secondhand clothes stores run by charity Working Wardrobes). They have what they call slightly used, high-end clothing. I got a full-length, wool Armani coat that looks like it was never worn, and it was like \$130.

**My motto:** I have two: “Impossible is merely an opinion” and “Always punch above your weight.” I give a lot of keynote speeches, and I always end with those two. If you can’t remember anything else, you walk away with the feeling that those two give you.

**Pet peeves:** Tardiness. I believe tardiness is disrespectful. ... In my company, before we were virtual, we had clocks everywhere. If the meeting was to start at 9 o’clock and you were one second late, you had to sing a song of everyone’s choosing. The last time anyone was physically late was me – I couldn’t get off the phone – and they made me sing “She’s a Brick House.”

**Favorite question to ask:** “What’s keeping you up at night?” It’s amazing how that question is disarming and it’s impossible not to answer. It gets beneath the surface of what’s really bugging someone.

**Dodgers or Angels:** Angels

**Red or white:** White in the day, red at night. I’m an equal opportunity offender.

**Best celebrity encounters:** When I was a reporter, I interviewed Henry Kissinger and Hugh Hefner – and everyone in between. Carol Burnett on her 50th birthday, Linda Evans on her 40th birthday ... Elizabeth Montgomery, I loved her. I loved Stefanie Powers.

**Best corporate cultures:** Starbucks and Trader Joe's. They both did what I call top down, bottom up. I try to copy them in building my own company by asking my employees, "What do you want?"