

Lawyers for rent



LONG WORKING HOURS ARE A WAY OF LIFE for veteran lawyers and a rite of passage for new recruits. But those hours don't always translate into revenue.

Indeed, while large firms absorb research and other labour-intensive work by delegating to junior associates, smaller practices don't have that luxury. Lawyers in small firms or sole practice often can't justify charging full rates for such tasks. Hours of research simply get written off.

Stephen Taran, president of Taran Virtual Associates, offers these firms a creative solution. Through his legal outsourcing network, he matches project lawyers with firms on a flexible, assignment-by-assignment basis.

His project lawyers, or "virtual associates", provide several advantages: they help manage a firm's fluctuating workflow by working only when needed; they require no overhead; and they charge below market rates. The firms profit as a result.

Taran's legal outsourcing network has over 40 lawyers across Canada, and attracts files from both Canadian and American firms. It clearly aims to be full-service; the associates have varying levels of experience and expertise to respond to a diversity of tasks and budgets. They assist firms in research, court appearances, drafting and discoveries, largely in the litigation and corporate commercial areas of practice. A "virtual nurse" dispenses advice on medically-related files.

After completing business and law degrees at Western, Taran established Taran Virtual Associates in 1997, right after being called to the bar. "I was the virtual associate," he laughs, recalling the days of juggling contract work, marketing and development. As the business has grown, his role has evolved,

TARAN VIRTUAL ASSOCIATES

BUSINESS	Legal outsourcing network
ESTABLISHED	1997
EMPLOYEES	3, with over 40 independent contractors
MARKETS	Canada and the United States
	www.virtualassociates.ca

and since hiring a project manager his focus has been on client development.

Taran deliberately chose a different approach from other placement agencies. Rather than simply linking up lawyers with firms, his project management team reviews all work and supervises the progress of each file. While this hands-on approach means more work for his office, Taran likes the quality control and peace of mind that it offers the client.

Realizing that people are his business, Taran selects his associates carefully. "I knew I could spend years building up the reputation of what we provide in terms of quality, and ruin it overnight," he reflects. Although many of his lawyers are word-of-mouth referrals, he also recruits at trade shows and bar admission courses, and advertises in legal reports.

In such a conservative profession, temporary lawyers still encounter the suspicion that they can't find "real" jobs. But as more lawyers choose non-traditional ways of working, that stigma is waning. The diverse backgrounds of Taran's virtual associates show why. Some have left big firms to establish sole practices or to spend more time with family. Others are working on PhD or master's degrees, have switched careers or have retired from the practice of law.

And how has the profession responded to the unconventional practice of outsourcing legal work? "A lot of people are really intrigued by the whole concept," says Taran. He points out that once busy firms make the leap to hire a project lawyer, they're quickly converted to the idea. "The response I get from so many clients is 'Why didn't I do this sooner?'" ■ *Alison Hughes*