

LEGAL BUSINESS ON EMERGING MARKETS

Outsourcing trend spreads to the legal profession

By Sarah Efron
Vancouver

Outsourcing has been a growing trend in the business world in the last decade, and now it's spreading into the legal profession.

Legal outsourcing companies in North America and India are offering legal research, document preparation and other legal services. They promise to help law firms and legal departments juggle their workloads and save significant amounts of money. Some American firms and companies are taking advantage of the price savings, while others are not, citing concerns about the confidentiality and quality of the work.

University of Western Ontario law and business graduate Stephen Taran founded Taran Virtual Associates in 1997. At first, Taran was the company's only employee; now he has 50 lawyers working for him as independent contractors. He has over 500 clients, mostly in Ontario, but some in other parts of Canada and the U.S. Much of the London, Ontario-based company's business is legal research, but their

lawyers also write for legal publications, interview clients and witnesses and locate experts. Sometimes they handle an entire file from start to finish.

"The client is happy because they can maintain their relationship with their own lawyer, but the work gets done quicker and in the end, the client gets billed a lower hourly rate," said Taran.

According to Taran, lawyers often write off their time because they can't justify charging their hourly rate for doing research. By outsourcing these tasks, he says lawyers can concentrate on other activities that bring more revenue into their practice.

Taran Virtual Associates' research rate starts at \$60 per hour, and can rise up to \$300 for court appearances. Taran said the service is particularly useful for small practitioners who don't have articling students or junior associates to pass work onto, or who want to hire someone with expertise in a specific area of law.

"If you're in a small centre, you have to be a generalist," said Taran. "It's difficult to stay on top of all



Stephen Taran, founder of London, Ont.'s Taran Virtual Associates. Photo by Steven Martin

the areas of law, and often it's hard to find a junior lawyer to come up to the community. You can tap into our network and we'll match you

up with the best person, a lawyer experienced in family law or personal injury or whatever you need."

Some of Taran's contractors are lawyers who left large firms to start their own practices, but their firms aren't at full capacity yet. Others are women with children or retired lawyers who want to work part-time. Taran said his company is not a placement agency — his project manager reviews the quality of the work before it's sent to the client.

Judith Wilcox, a sole practitioner with offices in Hawkesbury and Alexandria, Ont., heard about Taran Virtual Associates at a conference, and she's used them several times to do legal research and to draft plead-

ings and factums.

"I was very satisfied with the quality of the work and especially the timeliness. A few assignments had very tight deadlines, which were met with quality work," said Wilcox. "The benefit of outsourcing for my practice is so I can manage the peak periods and delegate work in order to meet deadlines, since the work volume is not consistent and predictable enough to justify bringing on another full-time staff lawyer."

And beyond our borders, at least half a dozen legal outsourcing companies have been established in India in the past several years. The country has already become a preferred location for call centres and computer support because of its highly educated, English-speaking workforce.

The new companies provide legal and patent research, document drafting and intellectual property work for North American and British law firms as well as corporate clients. They charge between one half and one third the rates of a North American legal professional and because of the time differences, the work can be

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