

Not found
your place in the
nine-to-five world?
Sue Boyall
gives a first-hand
account of
adapting to life
at a virtual
law firm

After more than 20 years as a commercial property solicitor in a central London private practice, I felt it was time for a change. I took a break, stepped out of the legal loop for a while, and am now back – embarking on what I hope will be an exciting new chapter in my career: as a virtual lawyer.

Ours is one of a growing new breed of ‘virtual’ firms, which are trying to reinvent legal service. There are several different models out there, but where I work the firm is essentially very similar to a traditional law firm, only without the bricks and mortar and without the employees. As one of my fellow consultants described it, virtual lawyers are free range rather than battery lawyers.

The solicitors are self-employed consultants, working from their homes or from clients’ offices or making use of facilities at satellite offices across the country. By using up-to-the-minute technology they can offer a service equal in many respects to that provided by the well-respected firms from which they come, and virtually indistinguishable at the point of delivery.

Free range

The firm operates from a 'serviced office' based in Reading, which is linked to 32 other locations across the country, where meetings with clients may be held. Letters and faxes received at the virtual office are opened, scanned and forwarded to the relevant lawyer by email with the original being sent by post. The virtual office reception service transfers all calls received by it for individual consultants or takes messages as necessary. The firm provides its lawyers with the insurance, IT, business stationery, precedents, know-how and compliance services required to operate as one would expect.

A conference call is held on a weekly basis and there are firm meetings at least once a quarter. This ensures that the consultants are involved in the business and get to know each other by keeping in regular contact. Not only does this enhance the firm's identity, it also means that consultants are happy to refer those clients who require advice on matters outside the scope of their own expertise on to their fellow consultants, just as one would in a traditional law firm.

Although the virtual firm offers a new approach in a traditional environment, personal relationships are still key. The importance of good client relations is arguably even more important than in the traditional firm, and this has to be for the benefit of both solicitor and client. And the fact that the overheads are lower means that it is possible to be flexible as to methods and levels of charging. Virtual firms do not consider themselves cheap, however. The term used is 'bespoke' – being able to offer clients senior legal advice at a competitive rate.

My firm opted for a limited liability structure with one eye on the future. With the advent of the Legal Services Act, law firms will soon be able to seek outside financial investment to assist with growth plans. The company structure lends itself more easily to such opportunities, for example, with the possibility for lawyers to share in the success of the company via share option schemes.

Keep it real

It would be unrealistic to pretend that working in this new way is without its challenges. Although the traditional model may have its drawbacks, there are certainly many positive aspects to working in a standard office environment. For a start, working from home, without the usual office ambience, isn't everybody's cup of tea. One might miss the office camaraderie, but the very nature of the work as a solicitor requires constant dialogue throughout the day with clients and fellow professionals, so I've not felt the loneliness creep in yet.

The absence of secretarial and office back-up and support is also a potential issue, and consultants need to be far more self-reliant as far as IT, document production and general office systems are concerned. However, there is good systems support available, and consultants are able to make their own arrangements if secretarial or other assistance is required.

The prospect of being self-employed and not having a fixed income can also be rather

including the opportunities to become involved in additional activities (for me, being able to become more actively involved with local charity work and advising at an evening law clinic), and the ability to juggle work and family commitments, are a worthwhile plus. Having been fortunate enough to have the opportunity to take a break from the traditional work model, and to build up a flexible freelance work portfolio as a solicitor and as a part-time LPC tutor, I have been able

Benefits for lawyers...

- Greater control over work-life balance leading to enhanced career satisfaction and quality of life.
- Getting rid of the daily commute.
- The opportunity to manage one's own work agenda.
- Greater control over service and delivery.
- Keeping a greater percentage of the fees generated (more than twice as much as in traditional practice).
- An opportunity for entrepreneurial lawyers to work and develop their careers within a modern and progressive legal services business.
- An alternative career path to that offered by the traditional law firm.
- The potential to address some of the less

attractive aspects of the profession that have been highlighted over the years – burn out, office politics, glass ceiling, lack of flexibility.

... and for clients

- A fresh approach to accessing legal services and advice.
- A national team of experienced solicitors working from either their own homes/offices or from their clients' offices (or wherever suits).
- A bespoke personal service covering the full range of legal needs and round the clock client access.
- Value for money – lower overheads enabling access to high-quality cost-effective senior legal advice.

daunting, but self-employment, while a challenge, can also bring its rewards, particularly since the consultants keep a far higher percentage of the fees they generate.

I first heard about the concept of the virtual firm in an article I read in 2010. I was greatly attracted by the idea of working for a firm in a manner that would offer me the flexibility to pursue other interests and opportunities while still being able to develop a fulfilling career as a solicitor. I saw this as a potential career path that was a promising alternative to that available in traditional legal practice.

While I have been extremely lucky with the firms I have worked for in the past, the very nature of the traditional law practice can be fairly inflexible. There seemed to be little appreciation of the need for an alternative to the conventional 'trainee-to-solicitor-to-partner' model.

Being more in control of one's own destiny is a great challenge but it certainly makes life more interesting and varied. An independent consultant needs to be much more self-reliant in many ways, not just on a practical level as regards IT and general office tasks and organisation, but also in taking responsibility for building up and nurturing one's own client base.

However, the flexibility afforded,

to become more actively involved in the community and develop new skills.

Now I will be able to focus on building up my own client base, while at the same time continuing with my other freelance legal and teaching work. This level of variety would have been difficult to achieve and sustain within the confines of a more typical work pattern.

Over the last few years many professionals have found themselves in a position where they are able to strike off in a new direction. Hopefully, there is no longer any need to try and fit a square peg into round hole. If things are not as you wish them to be, then this new way of working offers an alternative to the 'one size fits all' approach, placing you in control of the way you work, and how you include your other interests and priorities, how you interact with your clients and do the best for yourself and for them.

All of my fellow consultants share an enjoyment of the practice of law, but were looking for an alternative to the traditional law firm culture. Virtual firms offer just this – an opportunity to do things differently. It may not be always straightforward but I hope the challenges will be worth it!

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