

Law firm shakes up status quo with new boutique practice

BUSINESS PLAN | Forgoing the army of support staff and lowering overhead allows partners to trade big-firm model for a 'more service for the dollar' operation



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Boutique law firm, Hungerford, Tomy, Lawrenson and Nichols. From left: Winnie Sung, Mikis Manolis, Ian Lawrenson, Harry Tomy, Tim Nichols (in chair), Gavin Crickmore, Tanya Martin, Marika Giles, Robert Hungerford and Silvana Facchin.

BY MICHAEL KANE
VANCOUVER SUN

There's no law that says new law firms must have new lawyers who are still honing their skills. It just tends to be that way.

Nor is it written that big law firms with a depth of experience have to be outrageously expensive, but it's often the case.

Enter lawyer Robert Hungerford and three partners who are shaking up the status quo with a different model, a new firm with highly experienced lawyers who aren't under pressure to rack up billable hours to pay for spacious offices and a small army of support staff.

Hungerford, 55, along with Harry Tomy, Ian Lawrenson and Timothy Nichols hung out their shingle in September on 5,600 square feet of prime-quality but relatively inexpensive sub-let space on the 11th

floor of Cathedral Place in Vancouver's downtown.

That's just a couple of blocks east on Georgia Street from their previous firm, Campney & Murphy, which was dissolved in August after shrinking from more than 70 lawyers to about 40 who couldn't agree on a survival strategy while burdened with far more space than they needed and the bills to go with it.

Although most of their former colleagues have found work elsewhere, Hungerford and his partners have built the only independent firm to arise from the ashes of Campney & Murphy, and they have attracted many of the old firm's corporate, commercial and litigation clients.

"We're hoping to provide more service for the dollar," Hungerford says. "The lawyer feels more comfortable in this environment because he is not having to run like crazy all the time and build up his time to look after the overhead."

The firm employs four associate lawyers, an articling student and two paralegals to round out a boutique practice handling a wide range of commercial and real-estate transactions and the supporting litigation. Clients with everyday matrimonial and criminal work are referred elsewhere.

To keep the lid on costs and provide more personalized service, they have embraced top-flight technology and cut the ratio of support staff from about two to one at Campney & Murphy to about .75.

Gone are the coffee-wagon person, the office administrators, the three people in the Xerox room, the four people in the software division, human-resources staff, building and maintenance workers and the two librarians who all contributed to costs at the old firm.

Tomy is arguably down to about one-eighth of a secretary because he uses seventh-generation voice

recognition technology to dictate to his computer.

All the lawyers have flat-screen monitors to spare their eyes and they take advantage of a state-of-the-art copier that simultaneously faxes documents to clients.

"These days all lawyers type, it's vital," Hungerford says.

Fewer staff also means a more personal connection with clients and fewer lawyers means less likelihood of having to turn away potential clients because their dispute is with an existing client, something that happens regularly at the big law firms.

"Here I am in mid-life starting out anew and when I looked at all the alternatives, I thought this was the best model," Hungerford says. "There are no impediments, no bureaucracy, no excessive costs and no reason why we can't do a really good job for our clients."

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