

EMBRACING FLEXIBILITY IN YOUR CAREER

By Kate Ryder, Vanessa Vidas and Arie van Wijngaarden

How to get the most out of your career is a common question among lawyers. Today's legal careers are far different from the model of a generation ago. Most do not spend their entire careers working as an associate for a big firm to make partner.

In fact, the percentage of Ontario lawyers who are partners at firms fell from 20% in 2011 to 17% in 2016.* Options such as in-house, project management, legal innovation and contract work allow lawyers to have great careers while maintaining flexibility.

"When I started practicing, there was a very hierarchical 'up or out' model in law firms but today things are very different," says Judith McKay, Chief Client and Innovation Officer at McCarthy Tétrault LLP. "We need to respond by creating opportunities such as our MT>OnDemand solution, which gives lawyers more flexibility in their careers and clients more options."

McCarthy Tétrault's MT>OnDemand is a community of lawyers with strong technical and industry expertise who can complement an existing team; it allows clients to control costs, manage workloads and deliver work more efficiently. Models such as this create more options for both practitioners and clients.

Indeed, businesses need to be nimble to attract and retain 21st century talent. An in-house department may need to fill a parental leave or could benefit from someone who knows the company but prefers to work on ad hoc projects. The challenge is finding the talent to fill these gaps. Flexibility becomes a key differentiator for businesses assessing candidates and candidates choosing between different organizations.

Flexibility Within the Law Firm

Not every lawyer who works for a law firm is an associate or partner. There are a wealth of alternative opportunities, many created because of shifts in technology. For example, dedicated knowledge management lawyers manage systems to identify expertise and craft strategies around information governance. Other lawyers work in pricing and analytics, creating budgets and tracking profitability on matters. There are also options in marketing, human resources and vendor management for lawyers who want to use their relationship and critical thinking skills to achieve outcomes beyond the billable hour.

All of this is slowly affecting the law firm model and the services it can offer. A multidisciplinary team increases agility, creativity and focus on the big picture, including easing the legal pain points of in-house teams.

Project-by-Project Opportunities

Lawyers can also maintain flexibility in their careers by working on special projects. Susan Wortzman, Canada's leading e-Discovery lawyer and Partner at McCarthy Tétrault, says this offers lawyers unique opportunities they otherwise would not be able to access. "Lawyers benefit from having the flexibility to work from home, spend time with their kids and set their own hours," says Wortzman.

Her consistent flow of e-Discovery projects means she can offer both shorter- and longer-term opportunities, giving project lawyers more options. At the same time, her team's focus on leading edge technology, proprietary processes and a multi-disciplinary team means she can offer clients creative, cost-effective advice and services.

The project model Wortzman uses also has benefits for companies who need to be able to scale their legal departments quickly for major transactions or cases. Hiring permanent staff is expensive and often difficult to justify to the finance department. However, contract-based project lawyers can be a great way to fill this gap.

Lifelong Flexibility

Many practicing lawyers have no idea what they will do when they retire. This is alarming because 44% of Ontario-licensed practitioners are over 50.* However, hitting 65 does not have to be "game over." Clients are increasingly recognizing the unique expertise retiring or retired lawyers have, and forward-thinking firms are offering flexible consulting opportunities to these lawyers.

Lawyers should take ownership of their career flexibility at every stage of their development. Understanding today's array of opportunities is a useful first step to make this happen. The mix of in-house, project and consulting roles now available means lawyers have more options than ever before. Be sure to choose the right one for you. ■

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* Law Society of Upper Canada, 2016 Annual Report Data: <http://annualreport.lsuc.on.ca/2016/en/annual-report-data.html>