

Cloud-based firm may be antidote to Big Law burnout

On the Job

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I don't know why the idea of becoming a partner in a Big Law firm never resonated with me decades ago. Over the years, I have talked with hundreds of attorneys, who bluntly admit that making partner was never their goal either. It's funny to hear this chorus now because I always thought I was alone in this feeling.

I went into Big Law because lawyers practicing at the nonprofits I coveted advised me to practice first in a firm before jumping into the nonprofit world. I heeded their advice. Surprisingly, I ended up enjoying commercial litigation, especially, the people working in the trenches with me.

At times, we associates were pretty miserable — but we were miserable together. While there was never any formal dialogue in the legal community about work/life balance back then, we knew we were fortunate to be working on the kinds of sophisticated matters that overwhelmed our desks.

Interestingly, we took our first-class legal training for granted at the time, and we even complained about it. (What I wouldn't give for the attorneys who graduated post-2008 to have had that kind of training.)

While I don't practice anymore, I marvel how both men and women lawyers seem to balance the many demands in their lives in today's legal world. On a regular basis, I see both law firm associates and partners hand out their cards while coaching soccer, visiting colleges, even grocery shopping.

Law firm attorneys wear many hats around the clock. I quietly hope that these lawyers get to stop multitasking once in a while in exchange for moments of mindfulness and self-contentment.

No question — it's not easy.

Last week, I met one of my Big Law colleagues who I hadn't seen in many years, Paula Krasny. She was one of the hard-working and brilliant associates I worked alongside who made partner. She is also one of the smartest people I know.

Today, Krasny is a partner with Culhane, Meadows PLLC, a cloud-based firm with nearly 40 attorneys nationally in six major markets.

Culhane, Meadows has no associates and only hires lateral partners from Big Law, those with at least eight years of experience. The firm's goal is "to maintain a business model that eliminates unnecessary overhead associated with traditional law firms — while providing [its] partners with a better and more collaborative way to practice law."

The firm shuns lavish office space and other overhead expenses that offer little value to clients.

Sounds pretty good.

The firm distinguishes itself from traditional law firms and claims that lawyers are more fulfilled while clients are more satisfied with the value and the quality of services received.

Also fundamental at Culhane, Meadows is that attorneys do not live by the billable hour. As long as the clients' needs are being met in a timely and professional manner, the firm gives its partners wide latitude in performing their services. Although Krasny doesn't mind billing her time, she doesn't need or want to bill 200-plus hours a month. She is under no pressure to meet a billing quota. Amen.

To seasoned attorneys reading its website, the firm asks very simply, "Looking for a Better Way to Practice Law?"

My guess is that many attorneys would answer this question with a resounding, "Yes!" Doubtlessly, there are countless attorneys who have climbed law firm ladders, became dissatisfied and then changed firms or moved in-house.

Many have moved out of law or fallen into something completely different. There is no debate that as a profession, we lose lawyers in droves, women especially.

Some may ask what's wrong with this picture? Why do so many leave the practice?

For Krasny, having practiced in two large firms, she was ready for a more innovative law firm model. She enjoys the fact that she is not pressured to bill long hours. She feels strongly that she provides her best work as a trusted adviser and that she is building real relationships with her clients. She also appreciates her freedom and flexibility.

In addition, the compensation formula is transparent — favoring more objectivity in management. The firm claims "to embrace a predictable, simple and objective formula to calculate attorney compensation that results in our partners instantly retaining significantly more of their billable revenue."

What could be bad? Work/life balance? Low overhead and lower billing rates for clients? Flexibility and control over one's schedule?

Kevin Grierson, Co-chair of Culhane, Meadows' intellectual property group, appreciates the firm's innovation and flexibility, especially when first joining the firm as a single dad of three boys. While he remains an active parent, he also maintains a sophisticated

intellectual property practice representing Fortune 500 clients. Grierson also enjoys collaborating with his partners, often being “blown away” by their contributions.

Krasny added, “Culhane, Meadows allows me to be the lawyer I want to be. I get to worry about adding value to my clients’ businesses, rather than billables or office politics.” She values the opportunity to do exceptional work for a price her clients can pay.

Are there downsides? Sure. This kind of practice is not for everyone. Partners need to be entrepreneurial and motivated to generate new business. Partners need to enjoy working both independently and collaboratively. For lawyers who think creatively, this kind of practice can be exciting and very gratifying.

Reflecting back, if a practice modeled after Culhane, Meadows had presented itself in my day, I think I would have enjoyed building this kind of legal practice with fewer pressures. I think I would be thrilled for my clients, giving them high quality services at a price they could comfortably afford.

I think this model can solve many issues all at once, in my case, teaching the team a stronger “lift, step and go” move while still having my heart completely in the game.