

Happy Clients, Happy Lawyers: Why One Virtual Firm is Bliss

In 2010, when Deborah Epstein Henry, author of *Law & Reorder*, was researching ways to redesign the legal workplace, general counsel around the country had two concepts for her: secondments and virtual firms. Companies needed highly skilled lawyers, they told her, but only for part-time or full-time temporary assignments. Rather than hire an outside law firm, they were turning to “secondment” firms to source for them the right “temps”—at about a third of the price of a conventional law firm.

With a decade of recruiting and 15 years’ consulting experience, Epstein Henry knew well the other side of the equation: many top-credentialed lawyers wanted an alternative to the 2,400-billable-hours partner track, especially women seeking to maintain an integral role at home. She knew thousands of them; she’d amassed a network, over the years, of over 10,000 graduates of top law schools, many with both law firm and in-house experience, who were looking for alternative career paths. She lacked only the infrastructure of connecting this talent to the positions that companies large and small were keen to fill.

By partnering with Suzie Scanlon and Garry Berger, fellow attorneys who’d launched a virtual law firm in 2002 and had developed an impressive roster of corporate clients, Epstein Henry found her platform. Merging her network of both lawyers and clients with their clients and knowledge of the virtual workplace, she realized, would create a secondment firm that gave both clients and attorneys exactly what they wanted. Thus was born Bliss Lawyers, a readily accessible stable of A-list talent for Fortune 500 as well as fast-growing companies across industry sectors in ten states and counting.

Bliss Lawyers provides companies with top talent at significant cost savings by combining two innovations — secondment and virtual firms. Its lawyers work onsite within a client’s legal department, for about one year; 80 percent work full-time. Yet they are paid as W-2 employees of Bliss, which charges

client companies a flat weekly fee, based upon the number of days per week worked by the seconded attorney and the attorney’s experience level. Additionally, because Bliss operates administratively as a virtual entity, it does not incur the expense of office space and layers of administrative and marketing staff. The cost savings realized by the virtual model is passed along both to clients in the form of reduced rates and to Bliss attorneys who earn a competitive salary, performance bonus, a full benefits package including health insurance, paid vacation and sick days, and optional participation in 401(k) and 529 plans. This ensures Bliss retains access to top-tier talent while significantly reducing the cost to its clients—charging about 66 percent less than traditional law firms and 20-25 percent less than its competitors for similar talent.

Diversity on Demand

Diversity is endemic to Bliss: more than 60 percent of its placements are women, often working mothers. About ten percent of Bliss’s talent pool are “re-entry” mothers, who seek to use Bliss to onramp back into the profession after an absence. Some clients work with Bliss to increase their female representation at the higher ranks—what Epstein Henry calls the “backdoor diversity benefit” because the temporary engagement, at times, gives women an opportunity to demonstrate they are fitting for a high-level, permanent, in-house role. Additionally, Bliss’s network allows it to present slates of diverse candidates, another big plus for clients struggling to attract, recruit, and promote professionals of color.

Judging by the bottom line, the Bliss talent model is working: in 2013 revenue doubled from the previous year. “Bliss is happy clients, and happy lawyers,” says Epstein Henry referencing the company’s tag line. By helping companies reduce their legal spend while providing career-growth opportunities for lawyers seeking more control over their lives, she adds, “we’re delivering a value that the legal profession has not yet even begun to realize.”