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Insuring happiness

Ross Lee, who worked at insurance company CIC before completing his articles and starting at a medium-sized firm, says he didn't last long before downsizing to a boutique firm.

“They were taking themselves too seriously,” he says.

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Lee now operates his own specialist civil litigation and insurance firm, Lee Lawyers, on the Gold Coast where he and his family reside.

After becoming his own boss in 2006, Lee says small firms offer not only variety in work, but a more realistic and relaxed approach to billing clients.

“A lot of pro bono is done on the phone on a typical day,” he says, adding that he spends around half an hour each day on various phone calls with people “just enquiring about this and that”.

“You don't think to [send out] a bill - it's just part of the service,” he says.

The former vice president of the Gold Coast Community Legal Advice Centre, Lee is a passionate supporter of community legal centres, which he says help community recognition of the profession as well as the lawyers going along to them.

“To many, that is pure legal practice unsullied by mercantile issues. If the model's

right, you do 20 to 30 minutes of advice and you've done a world of good, but you don't have to weigh it into the day-to-day management of running a file,” he says.

“It puts everything in perspective. Studies show lawyers that do that are happier.”

While work may be more varied and involved in a smaller firm, the pressure to pay bills, GST and wages - and meet the demands of clients, trust accounts and paper trails - is great.

“Stepping up to run your own business is not easy. Half your day is in administration and there's a gargantuan amount,” says Lee. “You've really got to love the law and believe in what you do because there are going to be tough times.”

That flexible feeling

Stephanie Tan, a lawyer with boutique corporate and commercial firm QLegal in Perth, says moving from mid-tier firm Tottle Partners allowed her to specialise more in the areas in which she was working.

“It was good to work at Tottle, because it gave me experience in a lot of different areas. But since coming here, I've been able to specialise in commercial and corporate litigation and I better know my strengths,” she says.

Tan also enjoys the flexibility which QLegal offers, which she says was not as readily accessible in the larger firms in which she worked.

“They're really good at being flexible. They let me work at home if I need to, or I can travel and work with my laptop,” she says.

Boutique blitz

Tracey Kerrigan, a dispute resolution partner at Piper Alderman, has been at the national firm her entire working life but will soon depart to form a new boutique workers compensation firm in South Australia, with three fellow departing Piper Alderman lawyers.

The new firm, yet to be named and due for opening on 1 October this year, will present a “really different challenge” to her and her colleagues, Kerrigan says.

“We're going to have to be much more self-sufficient. It's amazing the number of decisions already that we've had to make about things that we've never had to think about before,” she says, adding that the change will be a good one.

“You're really spoilt when you're in a big firm. Everything gets done for you because there's a whole group of people employed to do it. We just do the legal work,” she says.

Kerrigan is certainly looking forward to an improved work-life balance at the new boutique firm.

“Being in a large firm, people don't actually think, when they're organising a meeting at 5pm on a Wednesday, that [I've] got to do the school run or get my son to sport, because they just assume that somehow that all gets organised for you,” she says.

Kerrigan says the trend to specialise is taking hold in the legal profession, especially in certain practice areas where the market place is competitive and the big firms can't meet the client's price.

Time will tell. **LW**