

## Business & Careers

# Technology makes work possible for office-less lawyers



**Luigi Benetton**  
Hi-Tech

Doug Simpson practises law and runs Legal Systematics, his online form and document assembly business, from all sorts of places. He works from home offices in the Toronto suburb of Burlington as well as Victoria Harbour, on the shores of Georgian Bay. He meets clients at their offices, or in rented commercial space.

About the only place he doesn't work is in his own leased commercial office. That's because he doesn't have that type of office.

He isn't alone. Many lawyers go "officeless" on at least a part-time basis. David Crane, for instance, figures he's in the office about 60 per cent of the time, on average. The Vancouver-based McCarthy Tétrault partner spends plenty of time on the road and in transit, and he considers himself on call most of the time.

Officeless work styles offer significant benefits. Expenses avoided include monthly office lease payments as well as office furniture, equipment and staff salaries. Not having "office hours" can also help lawyers craft more flexible schedules.

The chief enabler behind Simpson's and Crane's "freedom" from a physical address? Technology.

High-speed Internet access in both of Simpson's homes lets him work from either place. Crane connects to his office computing environment using the Cisco AnyConnect virtual private network (VPN) client, and he contacts his assistant via Microsoft Lync when he's on the road or in his home office.

Simpson also uses his own online forms and document assembly service to streamline his operation. When he drafts wills, "we've collapsed two or three meetings into one," he claims.

Crane's work style is the common hybrid of working from an office some of the time and wherever he finds himself the rest of the time. His wife, a former full-time lawyer, works as a contract attorney from home so that she can look after the couple's children. "We made the choice last fall for her to work from home, and she enjoys it, she loves the flexibility," Crane says. "She doesn't have any set hours."

Unlike Crane and Simpson, Omar Ha-Redeye doesn't have

an office at home. "I like to keep separation between home and work," says the civil litigator and member of the Fleet Street Law professional association, "but I do have a part-time office that I can use on a per-diem basis which is a 10- or 15-minute walk from my place."

Offering temporary office space for rent has become big business. Companies that do this spread overhead expenses among many customers, offering each one cost savings and flexibility they wouldn't get from traditional leases.

Service providers range from one-location outfits to Regus, which provides meeting rooms and virtual offices in more than 1,500 locations around the world. Simpson, a Regus customer, uses office space near his home two days a month, plus a local phone number and mail service. He can also book meeting or office space at other Regus locations.

Fleet Street Law leases a thousand-square-foot downtown Toronto office that matches the work style of some of his associates. It also enables the association to challenge, on an admittedly small scale, the likes of Regus.

"We rent out physical and virtual space to lawyers," Ha-Redeye explains, listing space, access to a boardroom for client meetings, a phone extension and mailbox as some of the services Fleet Street offers non-associated lawyers. "Not everybody knows how to set up a virtual office or is bold enough to do it independently."

Fleet Street's hybrid setup serves a larger purpose. "By having flexibility within our group, by trying out different things and communicating with each other, we compare notes, and we improve our best practices internally," Ha-Redeye says. "We're exploring every single angle to find out what works for us individually."

While physical meeting space still matters, options such as GoToMeeting, Skype and the phone can replace a lot of face time. Simpson knows the latter is still necessary, so "I co-ordinate all my client meetings for the middle of the week" when he's nearer to Toronto, he says.

Real-world meetings mean lawyers need to tote certain things with them. A phone, a computer and file folders containing forms clients may need to sign comprises the bulk of an office-in-a-bag.

Simpson is pondering the purchase of a portable scanner, but he isn't in any rush to get one. To comply with know-your-client

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**Omar Ha-Redeye**  
Fleet Street Law

regulations, he simply snaps a client's ID using his iPhone.

Paperlessness enables officelessness, although both states are more like journeys than destinations.

"Some things can't go paperless," says Ha-Redeye, while estimating that 95 per cent of his practice does not involve paper.

It minimizes my storage expenses."

Officelessness does have some drawbacks. Simpson notes the water-cooler banter found in traditional offices, but says "I have the same sort of camaraderie with the people I connect with regularly, by phone or GoToMeeting."

(Simpson's bias may stem from the fact that the three-person Legal Systematics business is entirely virtual. He's based in Burlington, and his two colleagues are in Boston.)

Crane still likes seeing other people, "walking right into their offices, knowing what's going on in the firm. It's hard to keep personal relationships alive if everyone's always remote," he says.

Virtual offices don't allow for personal touches — photos of family, law degrees hanging on the wall. They also don't allow lawyers to get messy, to throw papers into piles and leave them there until needed.

Lawyers may also miss out on the prestige of the profession, an attribute that often resides in a corner office overlooking a city where lawyers meet clients at mahogany tables. Ha-Redeye counters that objection by noting that lawyers pay for the mahogany table with longer hours spent at the office.

For all his experience, Ha-Redeye still finds himself returning to the office to enter data into his practice management system. He plans to try Clío, an online practice management system used by his associates.

"The goal within six months is to rent out the office," says Ha-Redeye. "Then I'll be completely virtual."

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