



Freelance Lawyers and LPOs: Distinguishing Your Services

28 December 2010

An interesting conversation is taking place in LinkedIn's group [Solo Attorney Practitioner's Forum](#) concerning the [prediction](#) that onshore LPOs will proliferate this year and the effect that may have on freelance lawyers. Since LPOs aren't going away, freelancers must gain market visibility by distinguishing themselves from LPOs and establish a firm, independent presence in the legal marketplace.

My sense is that the rise in popularity of use of the word "outsourcing" (i.e., "I hired a web designer to design my logo" vs. "I outsourced my logo design to a web designer") is somewhat the culprit in the association of LPOs with freelance attorneys. Back in the day when "legal process outsourcing" meant sending only largely unsophisticated legal projects to offshore service providers, the term had a much more specific definition. Now everything that isn't done by you or your employees is "outsourced". When you're talking about phone service installation, it's no big deal. But when you're a domestic freelance lawyer, providing legal services to other attorneys as an independent contractor, the use of the term "outsource" in any way puts you in immediate association with LPOs. That is not a place you want to be.

Why not? Because LPOs have been quietly creating an onshore presence which will no doubt proliferate in the coming months and years, ignited by the Thomson Reuters purchase of Pangea3, **with the intention of opening more US offices**. At the same time technology enables automation of legal documents, offshore LPOs who have experienced financial success look to expand the range of services they provide by upgrading the training necessary to accomplish more complex tasks. [Onshore LPOs](#) will quickly follow suit. According to [Fronterion, Inc.](#):

Onshore LPO represents an alternative for legal professionals who are wary of sending work to outside jurisdictions...Growth in onshore delivery is a result of third-party vendor investment in onshore solutions as well as captive centers developed by major law firms.

In other words, there is investment capital behind the movement. It is a high-level, big firm, international corporate world where freelance lawyers don't play. Nor, I suspect, would they want to.

Freelance lawyers are independent contractors hired by another lawyer or firm for legal projects that require legal analysis, research, drafting skills, client interaction, factual research and other skills not within the realm of LPO services. Usually solo attorneys, they form a person-to-person relationship with the hiring lawyer and participate in establishing case theory and other high-level lawyering functions. For example, freelance attorney [Corinne Tampas describes her work](#) like this:

Yes, I do research and writing, but I also help with strategy, and particular quirks of individual jurisdictions and courts. Moreover, as a US attorney I am more than familiar with the rules of confidentiality and my ethical obligations because I live them everyday.

There is a reason offshore services are called “Legal Process Outsourcing” because all too often these offshore firms merely process information and documents. I would like to think that I offer more to my attorney-clients. That is why I call myself “An Onshore Outsource Attorney”.

[Lisa Solomon](#), an extremely successful freelance attorney and outspoken opponent of LPOs, [says](#):

these companies [LPOs] don’t provide the value-add that US-based freelance lawyers can provide. Like Corinne, I also consult with my clients about case strategy; additionally, I take a proactive approach to identifying legal issues beyond the scope of the original assignment that may be crucial to the ultimate success of the projects I work on. Even as some of the large LPO companies move certain operations onshore, I doubt those companies will be able to provide this type of service.

The level of services offered by freelance lawyers is quite distinct from those offered by LPOs, onshore or off. But hiring lawyers are confused about the terminology. If both freelance lawyers and LPOs provide “outsourced” services, then what’s the difference? Freelancing attorneys must distance themselves from the label “outsourcing” so they can construct a market awareness of the higher-level category of legal services they perform, and the difference in the relationship between a hiring attorney/freelance attorney and hiring attorney/LPO.

There is lots of room in the current legal marketplace for innovative legal service providers to establish their unique value. Freelance, or contract, attorneys have been around long before LPOs ever came on the scene, and have a place in the spectrum of law practice offerings. By educating the public in a way that differentiates them from LPOs, freelance lawyers can seize their piece of the marketplace and perform much-needed support for attorneys that seek more than standardized and automated legal services.

For support in your efforts to develop a voice, there are several websites to visit. [FreelanceLaw.com](#) and [naflp.org](#) (National Association of Freelance Professionals), were founded by Melody Kramer and are entirely dedicated to the advancement of lawyers who choose to freelance through education, job listings and much more. At [LegalResearchandWritingPro.com](#) and [QuestionofLaw.net](#), Lisa Solomon, a freelance lawyer and pioneer of the freelance movement, offers valuable written, audio and video materials and trainings.