



Axiom Law: Prototype for Innovation

By Donna Seyle, July 06, 2010

Back in 2000, when [Axiom Law](#) Founder [Mark Harris](#) decided that big law's hourly billings were excessive, he may have been the only lawyer who cared. The party for big law had been going on for some time now, each year bringing higher fees that clients could apparently pay, because they did. Medium and small firms and solos followed suit, each year inching up their hourly fees, and lawyers buying big houses, expensive cars and sending their kids to private schools. It was, indeed, a very nice party.

But Harris didn't feel quite right about it all. So he did something that even today, lawyers are struggling with: he left his firm, teamed up with Stanford Business School grad [Alec Guettel](#), and in 2000 founded Axiom, based on a business model where lower costs enabled the firm to offer lower-priced or fixed-priced services, by structuring his firm around cutting-edge concepts and technology.

Axiom serves GCs and in-house counsel in all but the most extraordinary legal matters. Sounds like pretty standard outside counsel stuff, but Axiom distances itself from that model as much as possible in both what it does and how it does it.

Axiom is a business model with the intent to analyze and understand their clients' needs, and determine the delivery model that will best suit them. They serve over half the Fortune 100 companies in the markets they are established in, and partner with their clients to deliver:

- **Innovation:** Determine with their clients which parts of a matter should be outsourced or kept in-house, and how a project can be unbundled to deliver significant value;
- **Operation:** Tackle urgent or back-burner projects so clients can stay focused, and advise clients on everything from registered, high-yield financings to complex commercial transactions on a project or on-going basis.

Although they do not consider themselves a “virtual law firm”, Axiom attorneys do rely heavily on technology to perform their services and have been called the most successful virtual firm to compete with traditional models. Axiom has also adopted fixed pricing arrangements in addition to an hourly billing model, depending on the nature of the project and what makes sense for both them and the client.

Axiom's team of lawyers are not partnership-track associates. There is no law clerk courting, no offers of employment, no luxury offices. Instead, Axiom's 8 international offices operate with 280 attorneys who work from home or at clients' offices and sometimes gather for team work at small, stripped-down offices in New York, San Francisco, Boston, Washington D.C., Chicago, Los Angeles, London and Hong Kong. Axiom's attorneys average about 18 years of experience, and they must have a minimum of 4 years experience to be considered. They are well-credentialed, well-seasoned lawyers paid at rates comparable to those of in-house counsel in return for self-determination: the ability to choose their work and regain control over their lives. They are employees, paid a salary with benefits. When they choose not to work, they are not paid. But they are not temporary employees; they are once again engaged when they are ready to return, and their compensation is reinstated.

Until the recession, Axiom was indeed a law firm ahead of its time. It was built on the “revolutionary” concepts of partnering with clients, unbundling of legal services, fixed pricing, technology, and the opportunity for their attorneys to choose what they will work on, and when. Today, these are all models of law practice whose time has come.

While Axiom is an alternative to big law, it's innovative structure offers lawyers and firms of any size a glimpse into not only what can be, but now, what must be. The evolution of the law firm structure from its traditional form to one that can support offering greater value to your clients while creating a greater quality of life is an inevitable, and welcome, opportunity to examine the nature of your practice, the quality of your client relationships, the effectiveness of your services, and the satisfaction of your life-style. It doesn't need to look like Axiom. It can be structured in any way that enables you to attract and serve your clients. If innovation is in your future, the time to start considering it is definitely at hand.