

INVESTORS IN PEOPLE & LEXCEL CASE STUDY:

WOOLLEY & CO SOLICITORS



June 2007

Background

Size: 11 staff and 3 external consultants

Sector: legal profession

Locations: Home-based in Stratford-upon-Avon, but with a high concentration of lawyers in Gloucestershire and Wiltshire.

Status: Awarded Investors in People and Lexcel

Overall impact

"My aim is to create a massively successful law firm. And the only way of getting that is to strive for excellence in all areas. Both Lexcel and Investors in People have given us the tools to make this happen."

Andrew Woolley, Sole Proprietor

The organisation

Solicitor Andrew Woolley worked with a traditional High Street legal practice before single-handedly creating his `virtual` law firm on December 1, 1996.

"I decided I wanted to do things differently," he says

"I wanted to use software and the web to develop a new kind of law firm without offices, which in 1996 was really `rocket science. And I wanted to use email as the normal method of communication instead of letters."

Woolley & Co Solicitors delivers two main services.

For business clients, the firm handles disputes and contracts. For private clients, the firm offers divorce and family law for British clients

“As a `virtual` firm, we are able save clients an average of 1-2 months on the time it takes for a case to reach court. By using emails, we effectively de-mystify the l

both in the UK and abroad.

egal process by encouraging a culture of plain English and informality,” Andrew Woolley says.

“We are also able to give away huge amounts of free information in the form of fact sheets and articles on our two web sites, www.divorce-lawfirm.co.uk and www.business-lawfirm.co.uk”

“Most critically, we offer direct availability, with all of our lawyers easily contactable by telephone or email.”

The firm has built a steady base of clients from within the UK and from as far as the Philippines, Australia and Dubai.

The challenge

Despite attracting clients from the outset, the groundbreaking firm struggled in its early years to gain acceptance among the wider legal profession.

“I found it difficult to persuade other lawyers that what I was doing was acceptable to the Law Society - and that clients would actually come to the firm. “ Andrew Woolley says.

“The clients adored it straight away; but coaxing fellow lawyers to join us was very hard. “

Andrew Woolley`s next challenge was to manage the growth of the firm more effectively.

“Through the 1990s, I was dealing with legal work and running the firm at the same time. It was a major challenge to give up being a lawyer in order to run the firm properly.”

“There was also the financial fear that I was giving up that income from legal work for the sake of the business. I also had to confront my strengths and weaknesses as a person and also as a manager.”

Issues of compliance also needed to be addressed as the finances of the firm grew more complex.

“We have an ordinary account and a separate client account. There are incredibly complicated rules about the division of money between the two accounts and when you can transfer it. Basically, you can go to prison if you get it wrong.”

“Not only was I giving up direct involvement in my own profession, I was now leaning on experienced colleagues and trusting them to get it right.”

The strategy

Andrew Woolley embarked on a root and branch commitment to training in all areas of the business.

He engaged a business coach to train him in his new managerial role and launched monthly specialist training programmes for all of the team.

Then and now, the focus has been on customer care.

“Customer service is there in every aspect of the business and covers many of our compliance issues. It pervades everything – from how our invoices look to how we talk to people on the phone.

“If you read the Law Society’s surveys of complaints against UK lawyers, it’s incredibly rare for there to be complaints about bad legal advice or the leakage of money. It’s almost always poor customer care.”

The firm also focused heavily on sales training in order to increase the number of `leads` that were converted into business.

As part of its journey towards Lexcel and Investors in People accreditation, the firm has also developed its own online case management system.

As well as keeping the office manual in electronic form, the secure server holds training records, with lawyers maintaining their own records of Continuing Professional Development.

All lawyers work from home on `flexi-hours` and `flexi-holidays` and share in the profits of the work that they generate.

"The real underlying reason for going for Lexcel and Investors in People is that we`re looking to double in size in the next 12-18 months," Andrew Woolley says.

"So we really did need to build excellent procedures. That`s everything from risk management and case management to how to request a cheque from a client. I can now look at any file no matter where I am, at any time of day – and that`s great for supervision."

The results

The conversion rate of inquiries to clients has increased from 29% to 41% in the past year, with a corresponding growth in net profits.

"We also feel more of a team," says Andrew Woolley.

"And there`s a particular feeling of pride and a feeling of comfort and security among the lawyers that they`re doing what`s expected of them.

"My only problem now is coping with the CVs that I receive from other lawyers wishing to join us. Our `virtual` firm has gained acceptance."