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Flexibility failure led lawyers to create their own ideal firm



Jane Wright (pictured) and legal partner Lauren Barel thought they had work-life balance sorted. Photo: Louise Kennerley



by Fiona Smith

When people flee the corporate world, it is often because their bosses expect them to work as if their families have no claim on their time and attention. But Jane Wright and Lauren Barel thought they had that sorted. The two lawyers had broken new ground as job-sharing senior associates, working three days a week each at a big law firm Herbert Smith Freehills.

For five years, and with five children between them, they were the “poster girls” for workplace flexibility. That is, until they decided to go for promotion.

Wright and Barel, with ambitions to become the firm’s first job-sharing partners, were told they could only apply for promotion separately and they must compete against each other for it.

“It changed my whole idea,” says Wright.

That was the push they needed to use their expertise in workplace law to start up their own firm— Workdynamic Australia.

With the addition of Wright’s brother, Jonathan Wright, who left Minter Ellison so he could spend more time with his young family, the workplace investigations firm has

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experienced rapid growth since launching in April last year.

FORTY CLIENTS ON BOOKS

Already they have about 40 clients, have hired four extra lawyers and are close to \$2 million in revenue for the year.

"We are all top-tier refugees," Wright says.

Before they resigned, the women had identified a gap in the workplace investigations field. As lawyers, they had been struggling to find people who could investigate such issues as bullying and harassment and provide reports that could withstand legal scrutiny.

When they let their interest in the area be known, one of their main clients, the University of Sydney, was keen to be the new business's keystone customer.

"They were prepared to hire us the next day," Wright says. That gave the lawyers the security of knowing they would have an income.

The university originally wanted the pair to work full time, but the women pushed back to work two days each on the account. The founders were determined to be their own bosses. "We didn't want to be employed by someone," Wright says.

The team invested about \$7000 in set-up costs, with everyone working from home. There was access to a "virtual" office in Sydney's CBD – Clarence Professional Offices in York Street. There is nothing new in the legal work performed by the founders, but the investigation side fascinates Wright.

"I like the people-side of the law. Every investigation has facts you wouldn't believe. We untangle all the stories and set out what people believe is the truth," she says.

Wright says that interactions with people under investigation can be stressful, emotional and sometimes threatening.

HIRING STAFF WAS EASY

"You know when to step in and when to distance yourself... You develop a skill-set over time." As employment lawyers, hiring people was a cinch.

Other than their latest recruit, all were people they already knew who approached them looking for a better work-life balance.

"Some came from word-of-mouth, some came out of the blue and said: 'I would like to work for you'."

The last hire was the result of a SEEK recruitment campaign: "We now have a checklist for hiring new employees".

One thing the founders were determined to do was to build flexibility into the structure of the firm. After all, there was no point in escaping a corporate trap if they recreated the same restrictions in their own firm.

Barel works four days a week, Wright does three and her brother Jonathan works full time. He is able to work from home and manage his hours better than in a corporate job. Of the employees – all lawyers – only one works full time and the rest are part-

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time.

"By having a structure that is different from the standard law firm, from offering people true flexibility, which is what we do when we give people the ability to work from home, we get a really high calibre of applicant," Wright says.

OFFICE ATTENDANCE NOT REQUIRED

"We don't require employees to work within any sort of hours, we don't require them to turn up to an office at all, we just give them work and a deadline and we pay them for the work that they do.

"So they can work at two in the morning if they want to and they can do it wherever, whenever they want to do it. We have had a lot of feedback that it has been extremely positive from their perspective, especially if they have young children."

Wright says employees get a premium payment, above their hourly rate, if it is of a quality that can be billed to a client.

"So, it is as if we have created little entrepreneurs of our employees."

The employees are being paid about the same or more than they would have been in their corporate jobs – and they are being paid for every hour of work they do. In a law firm, there are large slabs of work that is unpaid because it is not "billable".

The employees at Workdynamic have to be efficient in allocating their time, or their remuneration suffers.

What they do lose, however, is a feeling of security: "In a traditional employment relationship, all the risk is with the employer. The only risk is that you will be fired.

"Risk and benefit lie on both sides of equation," she says.

But Wright says the founders are careful not to hire someone unless they are confident they can be kept busy.

Do your research: before they made the move, the women studied potential competitors to discover what sort of structures were in place and how much money they were making.

Save on office costs: working from home greatly reduces business operating costs. But Workdynamic employees have a "virtual office" for meetings and can use the company's hot-desking facilities.

Take control: you don't have to accept an employer's roadblocks to your career. "We don't need someone to make us partners. We can make ourselves partners".

Find a keystone customer: this gave the founders the confidence they needed to make the leap into their own business. "It allowed us to grow the business without the stress of finances."

Stay friends: the founders try to practise open communication with each other to make sure the pressure of running a business doesn't harm their relationship.

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