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No sibling rivalry as trio establishes boutique

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A brother and sister legal duo has joined up with another colleague to quit the world of top tiers and establish their own boutique law firm.

Jane Wright (pictured right) and Lauren Barel, who spent five years working together as job-share senior associates at Herbert Smith Freehills, have joined up with Jane's brother Jonathan, who worked as a senior associate in the HR & industrial relations team at Minter Ellison, to form **Workdynamic Australia**, a firm specialising in workplace investigations.

When asked what it was like to be working with a sibling, Jonathan said: "I think it's both a positive and a negative.

"I think we're pretty frank with each other ... there [are] no airs and graces, but so far it's worked really well."

The main motivation for the trio, who have seven children between them, in setting up the firm was to allow them more flexibility.

"I just found in [the big firm] environment I wasn't seeing enough of [my children]," said Jonathan, who has two children, one aged two and one just five months. "I loved the calibre of the work and the collegiality of a big firm environment, but I think I put a lot of pressure on myself to do the hours at the office ... I saw this as an opportunity to continue in my chosen field but also see more of my children."

"We're working quite a lot from home," added Lauren, "I think we're working just as hard but are able to fit it around our families a little bit more flexibly."



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Lauren and Jane, who had both been with HSF for more than a decade, had spent five years of that time working together as job-sharing senior associates in the employment group, with both working three days per week each.

“Overall [the arrangement was] extremely successful [with] fantastic client feedback,” said Lauren. “Partners were extremely supportive and were impressed with how well we made it work.”

“It does take a lot of work but we got very good at it. We were very good at communicating with each other; it really allowed us to have very successful careers and do good quality work while also working part-time.”

Jane added: “When we left we were the only job-share team in Sydney, but HSF is trying to roll out the model [we used] in the firm.”



Investigation gap

A desire for more flexibility was not the only driving factor behind the establishment of the firm, with the trio saying they saw a real gap in the market.

“It got to a point where we wanted more autonomy and independence; we [also] saw a really key gap in the market for investigative work,” said Lauren (pictured left). “At HSF we struggled to find legally-trained investigators that we could trust to do our clients’ work, so we really saw this as a fantastic opportunity and something we all really enjoyed doing.”

The trio said they consider investigation firms, rather than other law firms, as their key competitors, with Jonathan (pictured below) adding: “We’re not looking to [be a litigation firm]; we’re more of a business partner or consultant [and an] investigation-focused practice.”

Cost question

The trio described the firm’s billing arrangements as “flexible”, but admitted most matters would probably be time-billing based. They do, however, have a flexible retainer arrangement with one of their main clients.

“We’re basically replacing [that client’s] in-house lawyer,” revealed Lauren.

With regard to the recent trend of many partners departing larger firms for boutiques, Jane said, in the employment law space, she thinks boutiques are in a strong position.



“In employment law there certainly is more of a move towards the boutique firms, because the huge cost structures that huge law firms have [in place are] sometimes incompatible with the legal spend people have in the employment law space.

“The main competitors in the employment law space are more likely to be smaller boutique firms ... and I think some of the latest moves have been a drive to be more competitive with pricing,” she added.

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