



Setfords Spreading the work

Patrick Wingrove talks to the founders of Guildford-based 'dispersed' firm Setfords about the benefits of remote working and how the 'dispersed model' has revolutionised their idea of legal business

Law firm partners are increasingly feeling stifled by long hours, billing targets and a lack of autonomy – often associated with the traditional partnership model. In the past, launching a boutique was an effective alleviatory strategy, but today expensive overheads and complex regulations can make that a harder mountain to climb. Many lawyers now might herald the dispersed law firm model as the answer – which could account for the rising success of Setfords Solicitors.

The Surrey-based national dispersed firm was established by Guy Setford in 2006, originally as a traditional practice. "From the beginning I was searching for another way of working because I was aware of the frustrations of the traditional model. I wanted to build a successful business, but at the same time to address the problems that can exist in a normal firm." Inspiration struck Guy while attending a seminar covering remote working. He immediately called his cousin and fellow lawyer Chris Setford, and said: "This is it! This is what we need to do!"

Chris was "so excited, because we could see the potential for the dispersed model as a scalable business, which could provide a better life for lawyers and great client service." Chris joined Setfords as joint-CEO in 2009, and together the cousins relaunched Setfords as a dispersed firm.

Setfords has a corporate structure with directors and a senior management team operating from its two main offices in Guildford and London. It also has eight other offices in the UK – hubs of support personnel – which support 159 lawyer-consultants working from satellite offices



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Setfords**162 fee earners, 217 total staff****Offices: Guildford, Chancery Lane (London)****Specialisms: All major areas of law**

across England and Wales. The firm has grown rapidly, achieving a level of coverage other SMEs might only dream of and doubling its turnover over the last three years. The firm achieved a £6.2m turnover in the last financial year and has projected £8m for the next. Lawyers with different disciplines from different areas of the UK are fast-joining the firm, making Setfords the fastest-growing full-service fee-share firm in the UK.

Recruiting and retaining the best legal talent is a challenge for many firms, but the agile model at Setfords allows it to attract talented and experienced solicitors, says Guy. And, unsurprisingly, when you consider that Setfords consultants essentially work for themselves, they don't incur the overheads of setting up shop. They can choose their own work hours, charge rates and workplaces – many even work from home, and they don't have billing targets. Conventional salaries are also swapped for a performance-based remuneration system where lawyers are paid 50-80% of fees paid, up to £200,000 of billing and a flat rate of 80% on everything over that during a 12-month billing cycle – substantially higher than many traditional law firms.

But the real key to Setfords' success is an unceasing focus on consultant support. Setfords consultants have full access to an impressive array of secretarial, cashier, IT and marketing support, case management and digital dictation software, and even hot desks and meeting rooms. The firm also maintains dedicated in-house BD and digital marketing teams that win work for consultants.

Guy stresses that the effective application of technology is key to the business model. "We also own our own servers housed in a data centre and

managed by our IT department. Lawyers log in remotely and have access to case management and voice-over-IP telephone systems. Our web development team manage our bespoke intranet facility and consultant portal which they've developed to assist lawyers when they join and throughout their time with us."

Maintaining this level of support is challenging, but, says Guy: "Our support system is over and above what you might expect, incorporating checks, processes and procedures that go well beyond what you might find in other firms. We've invested hundreds of thousands of pounds in the infrastructure and spent our careers perfecting it to the stage where it truly sets us apart from everybody else – it is the single most important element of our business."

The principle behind all of this is that having happy, unstressed and experienced lawyers will ultimately benefit clients. Chris says: "A key benefit to our clients is that lawyers who work for us don't usually have as many clients as they would in a traditional law firm. As a result, they're more dedicated and can deal with a client from start to finish, providing a full service – they won't simply get passed onto trainees, paralegals or secretaries." The cost benefits of remote working are also substantial, and because Setfords doesn't

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have the same overheads as traditional law firms, it can operate in a much leaner way and remain competitive on price.

Yet another significant benefit of remote working for clients is that because Setfords lawyers operate across the country, clients feel as though their lawyer is close by. "The spread is an important part of our business because many people want to feel like their lawyer is local, even if they don't need to see them face to face, and we can provide that."

The Setfords say that remote working is the way of the future for law firms, for those operating as traditional models or ABSs.

"Apart from the cost-saving advantages, the added benefit of remote working is the removal of offices as 'interruption factories.' It means lawyers can work from any location in peace and quiet, which leads to greater productivity and quality of work" says Guy.

In terms of growth and expansion, Setfords "is not a static operation" he adds. The firm opened its London office last April under the name Setfords London as part of its long-term ambition to further expand into the commercial and corporate markets. Setfords London is planning on recruiting 20 new lawyers by November 2016 – its 10-year anniversary – and Guy says they're "currently in discussions with a significant number of lawyers in the corporate and commercial sectors interested in working as consultants." But the cousins aren't planning on stopping there. "We're always looking to evolve and are constantly improving our support system to make it the best in the industry. There are 130,000 lawyers out there and we'll continue to grow so long as there are those interested in practising law in a better way." **LPM**