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Pannone Lopes Devereaux & West LLC pioneer a new approach to 'billable hours'

BY THERESA KEEGAN



When Gary Pannone formed a new law firm in 2006 he didn't throw the clock out the window, but he and his four other partners did debunk the hourly billing system that has dominated law firms for centuries. Instead, a group approach at serving clients' needs was established.

"We'd all been trained in multiple disciplines so it allows us to create more of a team approach," he says of the law firm Pannone Lopes Devereaux & West LLC. The end result is clients are better, and more efficiently served, while the firm grows, thrives and embraces the new format.

"My only regret is I didn't do this years earlier," says Pannone.

Indeed, navigating through uncharted territories by creating a firm that encourages teamwork for and by all players, was a bit unnerving at first. But after working for years at a large international law firm, the five partners realized there was a better way to address the myriad of legal issues that arise every day in people's lives.

“We found the traditional system is often inefficient, duplicates efforts and requires partners to be part of the transactions,” says Pannone.

Instead, now members of the firm work in multi-disciplinary duties, addressing everything from writing contracts to planning estates and governmental projects. “It’s really rewarding,” says Pannone.

In addition to the five partners, the firm also employs 30 lawyers in four offices throughout the East coast “We’ve been really careful with the people we’ve brought to the table,” he says. “We have high-caliber lawyers who want to work as a team.”

In a profession known for cut-throat practices that embrace partner status as the golden ring everybody seeks to grasp, Pannone says the firm’s model is successful because the people in the firm instead embrace a client-centric approach.

Rather than having only one specialty, such as estate planning, lawyers are also adept at other areas, such as municipal projects and white collar concerns.

“If I have a real specialty issue, such as a tax or security question, I contract with a boutique firm,” says Pannone. “But we are able to handle almost everything that comes our way.”

The diversity of the firm is an essential feature that allows issues to be handled in house.

The main office is located in Rhode Island, where the partners are originally from and where Pannone still resides. Other sites include White Plains, where an emphasis can be found on municipal work, Boca Raton, Fla., where estate planning is featured and Boston.

Although the “specialty” tag can be applied it is not exclusive, and the interaction of all lawyers in the firm allows it to operate almost as a seamless organization, regardless of locale. The ability to use the services at all the sites means clients are offered an array of diverse services to meet their needs, without the requirement of paying exorbitant fees for a specialist who can only focus on one area.

One feature that the firm is particularly proud of is its Nonprofit Center for Excellence, which came about because of the firm's ongoing commitment to helping those who make communities better.

"You take the good from what is there and move it into a different platform," says Pannone. The expanded efforts have resulted in a 'one-stop shop' of resources that is available to nonprofit organizations and may include on-site presence of as an attorney or other professionals as needed and billing is very sensitive to the organizations, says Pannone.

"No matter what the situation, we're focused on bringing efficiencies to all our clients, but never compromising quality." The firm recently oversaw the procurement, construction, operation and financing of a new 6,000 seat minor league baseball stadium in Ramapo, an effort coordinated by partner Teno West, who works out of White Plains.

"Municipal Infrastructure is complex, but we know how to handle it, as well as all the other issues that are involved," says Pannone, citing labor, wages, even taxes. "There's a hub we've built," he says of the team approach. "And from my perspective, that's as good as it gets. It's good for the firm, and it's good for the clients."