

# Business & Careers

## When in need of a helping hand

If clients are not properly served, practitioners have to take notice

SAUL CERNOS

Call it a case of serendipity to the rescue. Sharon Silbert, a family lawyer working solo in St. Catharines, Ont., was feeling pinched for time earlier this year when a law student approached her looking for work.

Silbert had shared an assistant early in her career at a large Bay Street firm, and afterward at a smaller practice where she was honing her skills in family law. After two years on her own, Silbert found day-to-day administrative tasks eating into the time she wanted to spend dealing directly with her clients and attending to their files.

"Clients would come by to drop things off or pick things up and I'd be in a meeting with another client," Silbert says. "It was getting a little bit awkward and becoming apparent that I needed another physical presence in the office."

Out of the blue, a second-year law student looking to gain practical experience came to her, resumé in hand.

"I realized it would be a great opportunity not only for her to get a sense of what it's like to practise family law but also for me to have somebody help me."

The student returned to classes in September, but the three-month stint gave Silbert an opportunity to gauge how much work she actually has for a full-time staff member.

"When it comes time for me to hire someone permanently...I'll know what I need and what type of hours will make sense."

Silbert may be a solo practitioner, but she's far from alone in needing to recruit help.

Ron Shulman, also a family lawyer, is based in Toronto. Shulman Law Firm has six lawyers and nine additional staff including law clerks, bookkeepers and individuals handling human resources, marketing and front-room reception.

"I started as a sole practitioner and eventually incorporated into this firm," Shulman says. "At first I had a bookkeeper come in to do the books, but after a while it became clear that I would need assistants, otherwise I would be spreading myself too thin and would not be able to deliver the work to the same standard."

Shulman's first full-time hire was a law clerk who was tasked with co-ordinating court dates, arranging for clients to provide disclosure and financial statements, and preparing documents for Shulman to review.

"This has allowed me to focus more on what we typically call lawyer-related tasks," Shulman says, pointing out that he doesn't consider the lawyer's role as some kind of higher calling but instead views everybody who works for the firm as a team.

"We don't look at our clerks simply as support to our lawyers, and our lawyers as delivering the work. We look at our firm delivering the work with assistance from our lawyers and clerks. Everybody has to be fully committed to the end result of delivering to the client."

Shulman cautions against hiring assistants part-time or sharing them with other firms.

"Our employees have to be top-notch and committed fully to the firm,"

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# Hire: Reliability, passion just two key traits needed

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he says. "When you hire an assistant, they become your colleague. You're delivering the service together."

Due diligence in hiring and staffing is so important to Shulman that the firm has its own human resources manager.

"We have a professional development program with performance appraisals and feedback from clients," Shulman says. "It's a very comprehensive process and it's integrated into how we practice."

Shulman says firms need to set clear expectations not only for assistants but also for the lawyers, so all parties know what to deliver.

"It's a two-way street. They're there to do certain tasks. They should know exactly what's expected, and they shouldn't be wearing all of the hats. If it's difficult for a lawyer to wear all of the hats, how can a law clerk wear all of the hats? It's not fair for a law clerk to also handle bookkeeping, answer phone calls, and process-serve."

Qualifications are key, of course. But Shulman says passion, talent and interpersonal skills are high on the list when hiring.

"They should fit within the overall firm culture," he says.

As president of Intelligent Office Canada, a company that provides virtual reception services to a range of business organizations, Brian Monteith has his eye

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When they get to the point where they're too busy to give that professional representation and image up front, that's when they would need a receptionist.

**Brian Monteith**  
Intelligent Office Canada

on your front room.

Intelligent Office customers include law firms, and Monteith says a service such as his makes sense for lawyers who don't want calls going to voicemail.

"Virtual offices are becoming more the norm in our society, where people work remotely," Monteith says, adding that his team of receptionists works from physical premises and are trained to provide basic services such as answering frequently asked questions and processing payments.

Monteith says lawyers who practise solo often have minimal funds for staffing, so hiring an administrative or legal assistant might not be a priority until a lawyer or firm has built a substantial client base.

"When they get to the point where they're too busy to give that professional representation and image up front, that's

summer student, Silbert is getting a handle on what she will need this fall.

Already, Silbert knows she needs an assistant who has good organizational and time-management skills, a sharp eye for detail, and able to help maintain an office environment that's comfortable yet professional.

"The type of work I do tends to involve clients where emotions are running high, so being the face of the firm and trying to demonstrate the values that I try to manifest is really important."

For now, Silbert says her graduated approach to hiring is seeing her through the summer and helping her figure out her office logistics and how to establish a working relationship that's compatible with her practice.

"It's allowed me to start to think about having a plan to have someone working here with me."

when they would need a receptionist," Monteith says.

What makes a good assistant, then? "Somebody who's reliable, has a good head on their shoulders, understands the business and shows passion in what they do," Monteith says.

Just a few weeks into working with her

## ANNOUNCEMENTS



**BENJAMIN I. BROOKWELL**  
FIRM ASSOCIATE

The partners of Thomson, Rogers are pleased to announce that Benjamin Brookwell is now an associate with the firm.

Benjamin will be working with David MacDonald, Ian Furlong and Robert Ben in our personal injury advocacy group.

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