

This case example was prepared by Talent Advisory Board based on research it presented at the North American South Asian Bar Association (NASABA) Annual Convention on June 30, 2007. The firm below was selected for inclusion as a sponsor of the convention and supporter of NASABA, which supports diversity and South Asian attorneys in the legal profession.

Axiom Empowers Diverse Attorneys to Chart Their Own Course

Axiom Legal has 200 attorneys in its New York, San Francisco and London offices. It is a Benchmark and J.P. Morgan venture-backed company that was founded in 2000 by Co-Founders Mark Harris and Alec Guettel, who sought to offer better rates for corporate clients and a different work culture for attorneys. Axiom attorneys are unusually diverse with 34% minority attorneys and 52% female attorneys. Diverse attorneys from top tier schools who have worked at top tier firms seek out Axiom because it provides them with an opportunity to chart their own course rather than relying on the system.

Axiom enables attorneys to have more flexibility, control and self-direction as compared to the traditional firm fixed cost salary model which necessitates billable hour requirements. Axiom pays attorneys for the time they work. Axiom attorneys typically work at client offices, alleviating the need to bill extraordinary hours to support high overhead costs. The model appeals to four specific segments of attorneys: (1) very experienced attorneys who no longer want to work traditional firm hours, (2) in-house attorneys who are looking for more growth opportunity, (3) attorneys who have other passions but need to pay the bills, and (4) parents who are looking for flexibility in their careers.

Mehul Patel, General Manager of the San Francisco Office, says that female attorneys have an average of 11 years experience, and 22% are mothers. Axiom appeals to mothers because the work offers more schedule flexibility, a part-time schedule is a real option, and business development is not expected of attorneys.

One working mother said, "I joined Axiom because I wanted more control over my time, and the ability to take time off." Axiom matches attorneys with projects at corporate counsel departments. An attorney can choose which projects to work on based on expected duration, time requirements and project content. This choice enables attorneys to plan for both career development and family responsibilities.

Mothers who are looking for part-time options are attracted to Axiom because the culture accepts billing less than 2,000 hours per year as the normal course of doing business. By contrast, women who work part-time in large firms often feel stigmatized when opting for part-time work. One Axiom attorney and mother says, "Axiom empowers us to control the terms of our employment...without feeling ashamed."

Business development is an issue that causes many women to leave big firms because the demands are too high while raising a family. At Axiom, business development is conducted by a dedicated team so attorneys can focus on doing the client work. One Axiom attorney said, "I don't have to worry about business development and politics while I am raising a family." Although Axiom does not offer a partnership track, several attorneys stated that building toward a partnership track was not important to them at this time in their lives.

Axiom appears to appeal to changing generational needs as well. According to the NALP Foundation, baby boomers were more inclined to be driven, while generation X is looking for balance and generation Y is more selective about opportunities. In addition to opting for more balance, many Axiom attorneys are attracted to the ability to pursue outside interests. One attorney said, "Axiom enables me to pursue my interest in writing while practicing law...which is great because writing doesn't pay the bills."

What enables Axiom Legal to draw such a diverse population of attorneys with top tier backgrounds? It appears that the structural change from fixed to variable attorney compensation attracts attorneys who want to practice law and balance lifestyle needs. As the model develops over time, retention may become a key area of focus as such highly credentialed attorneys may encounter career advancement opportunities not available at Axiom. For now, Axiom offers diverse attorneys a place to enjoy the practice of law, while maintaining balanced lives.

Source: Anonymous Axiom attorney interviews; Interview with Mehul Patel, General Manger, San Francisco Office, Axiom Legal; *The National Law Journal*, "The Rise of the New Model Firm," May 21, 2007; *California Lawyer*, "Why Women are Leaving the Big Firms," February 2007.