

Canadian law firm starts contracting out legal work to India So, will companies pass the savings on to clients? You'll need to check the bill

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Just as an operator based anywhere answers your phone queries, so an Indian lawyer soon might be doing your legal work.

Over the past several years, lawyers in the U.S. and U.K. have been buying legal services from the subcontinent, where there is a host of cheap lawyers trained in British common law.

Now a new company called Legalwise (www.legalwise.ca) is offering the same service in Canada, starting today.

"No industry is immune from globalization," founder Gavin Birer said in an interview.

"Lawyers are more conservative, so it has taken a little longer for them to embrace the electronic age, but the need for this kind of service was obvious."

Time-consuming and repetitive but essential legal tasks can be completed, he said, without clients having to invest in overhead, infrastructure, or additional resources.

"It's a model that makes perfect sense in an age where businesses are demanding greater value for their money from their lawyers," Birer said.

The Toronto-based Legalwise has 430 lawyers trained in English common law in Mumbai and Pune, India, ready to work for Canadian clients.

As foreign telephone operators are as capable of finding numbers as easily as more-expensive domestic workers, Indian lawyers are as capable of rudimentary and generic legal tasks as Canadian legal beagles.

They can review documents, draft contracts, abstract a lease, perform due diligence or research and deliver a host of other services that a lawyer here in Canada would normally assign to a junior or an assistant, only at a much cheaper hourly wage rate.

Savings are estimated in the 30- to 70-per-cent range.

Legalwise also benefits from a time difference that facilitates overnight turn-around.

It's a model that could only be created with the advent of the Internet.

And it is beginning to take off because people have only recently become more comfortable with electronic business.

You no longer need to send a box of documents to someone. They can be electronically scanned, uploaded onto a server and accessed by those with the proper security clearance from anywhere on the planet.

As the electronic tools and system become more robust, Birer expects the range of services to expand: "It's a very new trend, but the sky's the limit in terms of the market. Of course, none of this could happen without the information that's now available on the Internet."

He said research indicates the U.S. purchased about \$146 million worth of legal services from India in 2006; by 2010, that number is expected to hit \$640 million.

An Ontario corporate lawyer with extensive experience in commercial and technology law, Birer was vice-president, legal and business affairs for Travelex Americas, the world's largest non-bank foreign-exchange company.

Before that, he worked with McMillan Binch Mendelsohn LLP and Goodman and Carr LLP.

"There are tremendous similarities between the Canadian and Indian legal systems and education, which ensures every lawyer on our team is well equipped to undertake legal support services that are easily outsourced," Birer explained.

He says there are already success stories -- GE Plastics and GE Consumer Finance saved \$2 million annually outsourcing legal services. Dupont boasts of trimming \$8.8 million in one year alone, he said.

Birer went on to say large firms with a lot of high-volume repetitive work and smaller firms that can't afford to hire help will be his company's main customers.

"We're not replacing local lawyers," he insisted. "Some elements of local legal work simply can't be replaced. We're a service provider. We're there to help lawyers do what they do more efficiently."

For big corporations and large legal departments, there would appear to be savings to be had moving donkey-work offshore. Quality control and oversight obviously will be issues, but manageable ones.

For the private consumer, the savings are going to be less obvious.

Small law firms will undoubtedly benefit from this service, but you'll need to check your bill to see if they pass that on to you.

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