

New path for diverse law team

BY JIM HAMMERAND
STAFF WRITER

A diverse group of experienced Twin Cities lawyers has set up shop to create a new law firm culture from the ground up.

Sapientia Law Group eschews the billable hour, has no management committee and its 11 partners, who come from a variety of legal practices and ethnic backgrounds, intend to swap offices every two years.

The firm's partners are African-American, Latino, Asian-American, Native American and Caucasian men and women who have practiced at major Twin Cities-based law firms and corporations including Faegre & Benson, Dorsey & Whitney and U.S.



Royal

Bancorp.

"The driving factor was finding people who ... really embodied the spirit of the firm, the values of the firm and a complete buy in of what we were trying to do differently," said founding partner and President Sonia Miller-Van Oort.

Miller-Van Oort, who in 2007 was the first Hispanic elected president of the Hennepin County Bar Association, and seven other lawyers founded the firm in March. They wanted to ditch the traditional hierarchy and billing structure to build a litigation-heavy law firm that could innovate along with its corporate clients.

"Change is hard for people, and I think it's pretty amazing that the people we have here on our team have all taken a high degree of risk," Miller-Van Oort said.

Sarah Oquist, a founding partner and former CEO of the Corporate Commission of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, found Sapientia's concept appealing because it doesn't force a choice between profits and concern for others.

Additionally, it leverages the different perspectives that a diverse legal team can offer. She said she learned as U.S. Bank's senior corporate counsel that all those viewpoints ultimately led to better legal services.

Sapientia's clients can opt for flat or performance-based fees, depending on the issue and desired outcome. Others who want to be billed by the hour will still have the option, but



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From left, Sapientia lawyers Sarah Oquist, Jeff Brown and President Sonia Miller-Van Oort. The firm's partners, who have practiced at some of the area's top firms, are striking out on their own.



Jensen

Chris Royal. "What hourly billing does, though, is it stifles the collaboration internally, and also there's an inherent conflict with the firm. If the matter settles quickly, then the whole matter was a lower revenue matter for the firm."

Rather than basing pay solely on work hours, the firm will tie attorney compensation to results, measurable pro bono work, mentoring and time spent collaborating with others.

Jeff Brown joined the firm in June. The intellectual property lawyer, who once practiced at Minneapolis-based Merchant & Gould, expects his income this year will be less than half of what he earned in his solo practice last year, but said the firm's other attorneys are sacrificing short-term earnings for a culture that will pay off long-term.

the firm wants to move away from that model because of the negative incentives and results.

"Every firm needs revenue," said founding partner and Chief Financial Officer

"We're going to have to prove ourselves. That's the challenge," Brown said.

The firm's leaders don't want the company to get too large, and envision it as ultimately having about two dozen lawyers. They anticipate making a few hires by the end of the year.

Sapientia has room for three more lawyers on the 12th floor of downtown Minneapolis' Plymouth Building. The self-financed startup wanted everyone to have equally large offices, but since each office in their space is shaped differently, they decided reassigning offices every couple of years would be just as fair.

The firm is betting that clients will see the value in predictable legal costs and diverse legal representation.

There are two other minority-owned law firms in the metro area, but Val Jensen, executive director of the legal association Twin Cities Diversity in Practice, said it's hard for women and minorities in the Midwest to build firms large enough to tackle work from big clients with diversity initiatives. She thinks Sapientia could fill that niche.

"I think it's a good business decision, especially in this market," Jensen said.

SAPIENTIA LAW GROUP

Founded: 2011

Headquarters: Minneapolis

Attorneys: 11

President: Sonia Miller-Van Oort

Practice focus: Business litigation

Web: sapientialaw.com

The firm's entrepreneurial spirit appeals to Mary Cullen Yeager, who "hired them almost immediately" when she took over Maplewood-based 3M Co.'s global litigation and dispute resolution operations in March. She was impressed by how the firm took time to understand the business and its objectives.

Tom Bock, an investor in Eden Prairie-based startup Big Deals Media Inc., said Sapientia has helped the cash-flow limited company accurately project legal expenses on customer contracts.

"The price that they quote is the price that I receive," he said. "Cash is tight with a startup. You've got to be very conscientious of how you spend your legal dollars."

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