

What makes Sapiaentia different from other firms?



It's not easy to convey just how different Sapiaentia Law Group is from more traditional firms unless you understand the core principles it was founded on. Here are a few, with comments from president and co-founder Sonia Miller-Van Oort and others.

Innovation as a bedrock approach

Innovation is a concept Sonia Miller-Van Oort has considered deeply in developing the blueprint for Sapiaentia Law Group. For her, the idea transcends simple revision: "I honestly think innovation is an overused word. Change isn't innovation. Innovation isn't just doing a small tweak. It's actually quite a risk-taking venture. It doesn't always pan out. I think you will see in history that innovators will fail but they will take that and innovate more. It's a process."

To create a new style of law firm, Miller-Van Oort turned to corporations such as Google and Best Buy as models, rather than other law firms. She also instituted an innovation advisory board for Sapiaentia, comprising community members, attorneys and entrepreneurs, to defend against inadvertently slipping into a traditional law practice mindset. As she says, "I really want to see this model work. What I hope is that this encourages other people to break the norm and to take some steps themselves. Hopefully we can continue to drive some of those things. I don't think we're done doing that yet."

No hierarchy

With 10 attorneys and three staff, Sapiaentia is as flat as it's possible to be. Not only are there no titles outside of president and operations, there's no ranking according to seniority, specialty, or rainmaking prowess. There are no names on the letterhead, and the 10'x10' offices are allocated by lottery. The flat structure extends to the firm's daily activi-

ties, where decisions large and small are discussed as a group. The firm is not run as a democracy, but it does function as a collaborative process to make the best decisions. Rather than becoming tedious, as one might expect, former Sapiaentia attorney Mark Zitzewitz says he found the experience of talking everything through to be "weirdly invigorating. When you're a junior partner at a law firm, you never have a say in anything. It was new to have a say in every little piece of running a law firm. Everyone had an equal say."

Perhaps the riskiest aspect of the flat hierarchy has been the use of 360-degree evaluations. A relatively common—though perhaps under-used—concept in business settings, this is a tool that is nearly unheard of in traditional law practices. For Miller-Van Oort, the reason is wrapped up in power struggles related to hierarchy. "Think of a scenario where you have associates evaluating partners," she says. "It's not going to happen. At first I thought, how are we going to pull this off? We're going to kill the firm. But it works if people are genuine, if they care about helping each other succeed. It's been an important part of our process here."

Fee structures that better align with client needs

When hierarchy is dropped, collaboration can eclipse competition as the standard relationship among staff attorneys—a necessary precursor to aligning the practice around client needs. As it turns out, lengthy periods of discovery and the use of the billable hour are not always helpful to clients, many of whom need to know costs before initiating services. Others would choose a lesser course of action if they understood the costs and likely outcomes related to a traditional process. By listening to clients and eliminating hierarchy, it becomes possible to imagine teams of attorneys lending just

the bit of expertise needed for a particular facet of the case without driving up the bill. In her frequent talks to the legal community about Sapiaentia, Miller-Van Oort is quick to note that it may not be possible to completely re-align fees away from the billable hour, as some clients do prefer that model. At this point, she says, about 55 percent of Sapiaentia's billing is tied to an alternative fee structure.

Diversity: built-in, not retrofitted

A commitment to diversity runs deep for Miller-Van Oort, partly from her own experiences but largely from watching talented attorneys leave firms in frustration. Refusing to define diversity as a simple equation of race or gender, she has expanded the concept to include a broader swath of professional experience: hence, a firm that intentionally staffs from a broad range of legal and business backgrounds while also drawing from as wide a pool of cultural experiences as possible. As Miller-Van Oort notes, "Our concept was, rather than try to integrate diversity, why not just be diverse from the beginning? So we're not going to have a diversity committee; we're just going to be diverse."

Miller-Van Oort reports that the results so far have been both positive and challenging. On the positive side, she says, "It creates a whole different energy in your work environment. There's a vibrancy in the way that people interact, the different ways that people come to a situation and a perspective." On the other hand, she notes the inherent difficulty in truly listening and honoring multiple viewpoints: "I will say that there are challenges with managing diversity that I didn't necessarily foresee. It takes a different management skill to move forward with diverse views but still advance the ball. That's been a good learning experience for me; it's something I'm still growing with." ▲