

MAY 16, 2007

A partnership of convenience

Firms offer perks to attorneys for better work-life balance.

Wed, May 16 - 2007

Rebecca Berfanger - rberfanger@ibj.com

IL Staff

Jackie Murphy likes helping people. And with more than 23 years of experience in the legal world, she has seen her share of lawyers who need help.

So it makes sense that a law firm would want to engage both her legal knowledge and her concierge services to help them help their attorneys have a better worklife balance.

Sommer Barnard recently accepted Murphy's proposal that she devote two days a week to help its attorneys with virtually anything from grocery shopping to pet sitting and house sitting for attorneys who are out of town, and even as a courier service for legal documents.

Even with other couriers in the market, Murphy is dedicated to that one errand and can also tell if anything is missing or misfiled before she does the errand.

"If you need to get something to the court right away, such as a divorce petition, you need to get that to the client, have them sign it, then get it back and get it filed. You don't want to wait," she said.

She can also deal directly with the courts on her clients' behalf.

"Because I know what needs to be filed, I can check their filing to make sure they have appropriate number of copies, or if they forget an appearance, or if the cause number is wrong, or if they need envelopes I can correct that before heading to the court," Murphy said.

"But if a regular courier was missing something, they would need to take back the whole thing to law firm, then go back," Murphy said.

All told, Murphy has about 100 clients, not just Sommer Barnard attorneys. She markets her services as a way for them to save time and can consult them on how much time they could save if she does the work for them.

"The main benefit of her services for our attorneys is the use of their time," said Becky Peterson, human resources director for Sommer Barnard. "Our lawyers' time is precious. Their time literally is money. For someone to run errands for them is money in their pockets."

Murphy said that a consultation with one client showed that she could save them 16 hours every month, something the attorney appreciated for his family of five children and he and his wife, who both work full time.

"People think it takes 10 minutes to go to the store," Murphy said. "But it may take 10 minutes to drive there, then 10 minutes to shop, then 10 minutes to get back, then 10 minutes to put it all away. You may need to go to the grocery store and Target and have a soccer game for a child at 5 p.m. But if you can't run errands before the game and it doesn't get out until 6:30 p.m., it could be difficult to get it all done."

She can also fill in as a temp when firms need a legal assistant for a day or two, and if she can't, she'll be able to get someone who can through her network. While she has at least one competitor in the Indianapolis area, she is the only one with the legal knowledge that she's aware of.



IL Photo/Robyn Jensen

Jackie Murphy (left) of EK Errands Express has Sommer Barnard attorney Michael Byron complete paperwork prior to her doing some business for him at the Bureau of Motor Vehicles.

Murphy's services aren't the only benefit that Sommer Barnard offers their employees.

Peterson said that they also offer a dry cleaning pick up and delivery service, chair massages once a week, an active wellness awareness program that includes a health fair, free fitness center membership, and free fresh fruit every single day.

"The general philosophy of our firm is to make sure that employees feel that they do matter," Peterson said. "Because of that relationship, the firm benefits and employees benefit."

Peterson added that employees still pay for some of the services, but again, the issue of saving time is what really matters.

"The general philosophy of our firm is to make sure that employees feel that they do matter."

Becky Peterson,
HR director,
Sommer Barnard

"We could give them money to do their own dry cleaning, but we give them the convenience," she said. "People also give certificates for chair massages to each other. That happens quite a bit. I expect that to happen with Jackie – as a gift, here's an hour or two of Jackie's services."

Ice Miller offers similar perks to attorneys to help them achieve a work-life balance.

"We recently started offering meal delivery from My Girlfriend's Kitchen," said Louonna Kachur, director for the firm's HR department. "They can order online, and it's delivered here, put in a freezer, and they can take home those meals at night."

The firm also offers dry cleaning pick up and drop off, discounted membership for the gym that's in the building, free fresh fruit available every Monday and Wednesday, and anyone working after 6 p.m. Monday through Thursday gets free dinner. The firm also recently started an on-site yoga class.

"We think it's important to recognize all of our associates have outside lives, and it's important to help them to achieve that balance," Kachur said.

In addition to the perks mentioned, other firms have offered their attorneys larger budgets for seminars and travel expenses, said Bob Birge, who does marketing for a number of medium and small firms around the state.

Even smaller firms, such as six-member Rockhill Pinnick in Warsaw, offer their attorneys free membership to a country club. While the idea may seem old fashioned, the firm's attorneys see the benefits – a place to network with clients and potential clients, as well as a place to go with their families or attend events.

"Generally the firm pays our dues so we can participate in events at the club, then we pay for personal use," said Dana Leon, a partner at the firm. "It was one of the things that made the position attractive to me, to be able to enjoy that with clients and with my family."

All six attorneys in the firm take advantage of the service. The firm also pays dues for community organizations.

"The firm supports our involvement in other organizations. (Partner) Rick Helm is in Kiwanis, and the firm pays his dues. I'm in Tri-Kappa as a very active member, and the firm pays my dues. If we can help support and encourage those things, it shows that our community involvement extends beyond just the work we do for the firm."

Then there are also programs for the kids' of attorneys, such as Barnes & Thornburg's recent, "Take your child to work day."

The firm invited children into a mock courtroom, challenging them to debate the issue of students being forced to wear school uniforms. After selecting a judge, jury, attorneys, and student and parent witnesses, children acted out their respective roles to represent their side of the school uniform case.

For the past two years, Barnes & Thornburg has used this mock trial model to help children experience the legal process firsthand. From a case relating to McDonald's to an eminent domain lawsuit involving SpongeBob SquarePants' place of employment, The Krusty Krab, these creative exercises have engaged children to encourage a better understanding and appreciation of their parents' profession.

It's not just a day for parents to spend with their children, but a day for children to better understand what it is their parents do. •