

Firm longevity a bonus, not core asset

A long history won't guarantee a legal firm's ongoing success, however it may provide a crucial edge in talent attraction

By Jenny Wagler

BC's oldest law firm, **Richard Buell Sutton LLP**, celebrates 140 years this year, with a rich history that includes founder **Albert Norton Richards** going on to become B.C.'s second lieutenant governor.

Yet managing partner **Jeff Lowe** said that while the firm's longevity has helped shape its culture and client base and plays into talent attraction, the firm's age plays a fairly peripheral role in its ongoing success.

"It is nice that we go back to 1871, but the reality is from a day-to-day perspective and our business model, it's really focused around how do we maintain and enhance these [client] relationships, which we've had for years and years and years?"

Warren Smith, B.C. managing director for legal recruiting firm the **Counsel Network**, agreed that older firms can't depend on a long history to deliver ongoing business results.

"My sense is that law services in the end are professional services firms, and professional services invariably turn on the professional providing the service," he said. "I see it time and time again: good talent attracts good clients."

Yet to attract that top talent in the first place, Smith said, firm longevity can be a selling point.

"I'd say lawyers probably prize the longevity, the brand and the history more so than clients do," he said, "because it says something about the ability of that firm to project and persist and stay with a block of clients, and that's the value."

Lowe noted that an ancillary factor to firm age – long-standing clients – may even trump pure longevity for talent attraction. In Richard Buell Sutton's case, he said, long-standing clients such as the **University of British Columbia** may be the big draw for some lawyers.

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Jeff Lowe, managing partner of Richard Buell Sutton: "I'm not sure that being the oldest [law firm] in B.C. is the draw as much as that [lawyers] understand perhaps who some of our clients are"

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Whether the talent attraction edge comes from longevity or the ancillary benefit of long-standing clients, it's an edge younger firms need to work hard to compete against.

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Local boutique firm **McCullough O'Connor Irwin LLP**, still a younger player on the city landscape after 17 years in business, is facing some of the recruiting challenges associated with being relatively young, small and unknown outside the arena of

corporate and securities law – the firm's practice focus.

"People who practise in that area know us very well and people outside of that area have no idea who we are," said founding partner **Jonathan McCullough**. "So for attracting junior lawyers, it's a challenge for us and, quite frankly, we have to use recruiters heavily in order to identify people and we have to work hard to communicate to them who we are."

But if firm longevity can help attract talent, it can also present challenges.

Lowe said that Richard Buell Sutton pours a lot of time into maintaining its long-standing client relationships – an approach that may not suit lawyers who'd rather focus on building new business.

"We want to make sure that people are aligned with our overall business model and our overall strategy, because for me, where the angst comes from in law firms is when you get people who are not aligned with your strategic objectives."

For Richard Buell Sutton, this is an approach that has paid off before.



Jonathan McCullough, founding partner of McCullough O'Connor Irwin, says the 17-year-old boutique firm uses recruiters to attract junior lawyers because people outside the firm's practice area "have no idea who we are"

Lowe credits a common focus on long-term client relationships for the success of the very 1985 merger that created the firm out of parent firms **Buell Ellis, Sutton Braidwood and Richards Underhill** – and continued the firms' legacies.

"What was driving the merger at the time was that all of each firm had very long-standing clients, which were quite large clients for the size of each individual firm, and there was concern that they did not have the resources to support the full client needs," he said.

"What worked so well was they were all very old, very long-standing firms that I think were like-minded in the sense that they were very focused on these long-term client relationships."

As to how the historic firm is planning for the future, Lowe said it's following a course set five years ago through a strategic plan that de-emphasized performance statistics such as billable hours.

"We basically created a model whereby we said, 'How can we



Warren Smith, B.C. managing director for the Counsel Network: firm longevity can help attract good talent and "good talent attracts good clients"

build the best business we can, provide the best service we can and create a good work environment?" and 'Let's get away from worrying exactly who's doing what,'" he said. That strategic plan, he said, is working well and gets tweaked annually.

"We continue to try and stay light on our feet," he said. "Because obviously, the business environment over the past few years has impacted many of our clients and we have to be able to adapt and change to meet their changing needs and requirements." ■

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