

sees her carrying out the typical research, document drafting and client networking involved with that type of work.

So what about "office culture"?

Diarmaid isn't so sure that you can generalise about a typical office culture for country firms, but Jacinta feels that there is a "distinct lack of competitive instinct" amongst practitioners within her firm and others, as well as "...more of a collaborative effort" amongst those working on a matter. This must necessarily lead to greater confidence for young lawyers still developing their skills.

So with this wonderful work/life balance, career autonomy and support, why aren't young lawyers flocking to country firms?

There is difficulty in both attracting and retaining articulated clerks and young lawyers.

Diarmaid believes that for city law students, this is because of "...fear of the unknown", reluctance to leave friends and family and lower pay, together with what Jacinta describes as a "deeper" perception that "...work in the country is not as interesting or challenging as work in the city".

On this issue, Jacinta believes the only

difference is that some clients and transactions are "grander" in large city commercial firms, and their resources mean they can retain niche practices – such as intellectual property.

Indeed, the work is inherently challenging for any articulated clerk in the country where most firms don't have the luxury of hiding articulated clerks in the corner of the firm, nor of always restricting them to one specific area of practice.

Jacinta says there is simply a "...faster learning curve" in the country.

At the same time, Jacinta perceives that the complexity and fast paced changes in the law is making the "jack of all trades" not as viable as in the past and more specialisation is occurring.

These perceptions don't seem dissimilar to those faced by smaller city and suburban firms (and Diarmaid acknowledges this).

Yet there are many issues faced by country practices that are theirs alone.

There is the increased centralisation of court services, which has meant that there is greater travel needed to get to Court, fewer circuits and poorer facilities.

There is the obvious "tyranny of

distance" which can make young country practitioners cut off from interacting with their city counterparts – socially, on professional committees and accessing CLE.

Worse still, notes Jacinta, is the tyranny of the Internet, which is making city firms more able to encroach on country firms' traditional client base, their own communities.

Something on any young lawyer's mind as they contemplate re-paying their HECS debt, is money!

Diarmaid and Jacinta acknowledge one "negative": that the remuneration is lower in the country than in the city. But both are quick to point out that this is balanced with a lower cost of living and is more than made up for by the work environment and lifestyle factors.

Indeed, attention in the Melbourne legal community has long been focused squarely on the concept of a "work/life balance" for lawyers, which culminated recently in the launch of the Young Lawyers' "Healthy Balance" Guidelines. Yet for most rural firms this is already a reality – not PR-speak and certainly not something that needs to be imposed!

young suburban practitioners

the vibe from the 'burbs

By Marita Hogan, Lander & Rogers

Juli Skeparoski and Deren Hassan are young practitioners who have chosen to work in small suburban practices.

Juli is a first year solicitor at DJ Thwaites Pty Ltd in Rosanna which was a sole practitioner firm until Juli began working there after completing Leo Cussen's

practical training course.

Deren is a fourth year with De Marco & Co in Glenroy. He also completed the Leo Cussen training course and did a stint of work experience at De Marco's as a law student. He says he has an understanding of local issues and has

ties with the community in Coburg/Glenroy as his father is a recently retired real estate agent in the area.

The high level of client contact, often on a day to day basis, is cited by Juli and Deren as one of the greatest advantages of working in the suburbs.

Although, avoiding traffic and working close to home is pretty good too!

Juli told me that she “always knew [she] did not want to work for a large city firm”. And it was not so much that she chose to work in the suburbs, but that she wanted to go to a smaller firm.

Deren, on the other hand, has “ties to the local community and connections with local business, and [has] always worked in suburban firms.”

According to Juli and Deren most suburban firms generally have practice areas covering conveyancing, wills and probate, family, criminal and commercial litigation.

Deren’s firm mostly does conveyancing, family law and business law, “however [the firm] will take on any business that comes in off the street and engage specialists if necessary.”

When asked about her “typical working day” Juli says:

“I am supposed to start work at 9:00, but I generally arrive between 8:30 and 8:45. The first thing I do is have a conference with the principal of the firm, where I ask questions about any files that I am working on, receive new files or files that he has been working on and wants me to take over, or just generally discuss any problems or ideas I have about work.”

“Then I usually prepare myself for the day, find all the files I intend working on that day, by the time this happens the mail has usually arrived.”

“Once the mail is sorted, I dictate any correspondence that may need to go in relation to the mail.”

“The majority of my work at the moment is conveyancing so I spend a lot of time on the phone with the banks – I try to get them early in the morning between 8:30 - 9:30 or 1 - 2 as they are generally less busy then.”

“My principal and I usually try to check our outgoing mail two to three times a

day, once in the morning around 11:00, around 2:30 and then before the end of the day. It helps to cut down the rush at the end of the day.”

“I generally have lunch between 1-2.”

“Afternoons are often spent returning calls or going through the files I need to work on.”

“Depending on how busy we are, my finishing time varies, however most days I leave the office by 5:30.”

Deren often starts the day by doing appearance work, for instance at the local Magistrates’ Court and then returns to the office to work on his files.

He commonly meets with clients and/or counsel during the day, and he often works long hours and comes in on weekends. However occasionally, he “goes home for lunch – which is nice.”

Juli does not believe that there is a typical office culture operating in suburban firms – she says that she can only go off what she has experienced and compare that to what her friends are going through.

“I think office culture/practicing environment is dictated more so by the size of the firm.”

“The way this office runs is different to say a larger suburban office, as there are only two lawyers and at all times we need to know what is happening on each other’s files in order to field any questions that may arise.”

In comparison, Deren believes that “the typical culture of a suburban practice is probably a suburban ethos, which is an understanding of local issues and clientele.”

“At De Marco’s, we have 10-15 staff and a really flexible and good team orientation. The support staff are excellent and I’m highly budget conscious in terms of having to pay my secretary’s salary.”

When asked about what they like about practicing in the suburbs, both

mention their clients and the high level of contact they have with them – Deren believes he has a much higher level of client contact compared to other young lawyers who work in big city firms.

According to Juli, “it is great to see or hear their reaction when you have completed their matter or solved their problem. This is one of the reasons I wanted to work for a smaller firm, to be able to have contact with my clients on a day to day basis.”

Deren also “really enjoys the community aspects of working in a suburban firm. I’m studying towards a BA part-time so I have been given study leave to attend lectures.

“It’s good to have this flexibility of work practice. I also like getting to know the local personalities and faces including those at the local council and Magistrates’ Court.”

But there are some downsides to practising in the suburbs. Juli feels that “networking is harder in the suburbs – you don’t get to see your friends as much, and there are not as many young lawyers in the suburbs so it is harder to talk to people who are experiencing the same problems as you.”

Deren comments that “it is harder to meet budget when you don’t have corporate clients and although it is common to work long hours in suburban firms, salaries are much lower than at city firms ...”

“Staying competitive with city firms and retaining young lawyers is difficult. Many young suburban practitioners leave to go to city firms or to the bar.”

Juli also believes that there are difficulties in retaining young lawyers in suburban practices.

“I attended a Northern Suburban Lawyers’ dinner and would have been the youngest person there and there were very few young lawyers in attendance.”

"Maybe it is that they are less active in those type of things or maybe there aren't many of us in the suburbs – in particular, younger women."

Deren and Juli also both agree that many suburban practitioners face difficulties when it comes to accessing resources.

For this reason, Juli says that it can sometimes be hard to keep up with changes in the law.

"The internet has helped this but there are still issues for suburban firms as not all can afford to constantly upgrade their research systems".

Another problem encountered by suburban practitioners that is unlikely to be encountered by their city counterparts is, according to Deren, the fact that "resources for career development are limited as there are few CLEs and it is difficult to specialise in a suburban general practice."

practising in London an impression

By Peter Larsen (an Australian and former corporate lawyer practising in a London law firm, Ashurst Morris Crisp)

Earlier this year, shortly after joining a large law firm in London, I found myself in the back of a cavernous London taxi, rumbling around the pre-dawn streets of the City, past the Bank of England in Threadneedle Street and under the dome and great portico of St. Paul's Cathedral at the end of an all-night negotiation on a deal which was to close in the next 48 hours.

The contrast between the ancient city of London, steeped in tradition and history and the vast scale and relentless pace of this deal, its size and its complexity struck me forcibly that morning. It is a contrast which, I think, characterises much of legal practice in London.

I might add, that finding myself in the same situation the following morning after a second all night negotiation I was slightly less enthusiastic about the marvels and contrasts of London and far more focused on the prospect of a shower and some well-earned rest!

The above, albeit not characteristic of every day experience, certainly characterises to a large degree the very busy side of corporate legal practice in a large firm in London.

The size and magnitude of the deals both in terms of their financial value

and their complexity is astounding.

The same is true of the volume of work which seems to come through the city.

This invariably influences the way in which law is practised in London.

Of necessity, work is turned around quickly and efficiently and a great deal of responsibility is given to assistant solicitors from quite a junior level.

This is, of course, both daunting as a newcomer to London and also very stimulating as the opportunity to become involved in projects and transactions at a very high level from an early stage in one's career is there.

Before moving to London and back to private practice earlier this year, I had held the position of General Counsel and Company Secretary of one of Victoria's privatised electricity utility companies.

While working in that environment required a great deal of self-direction and independence, and conferred a high level of responsibility in the management of the company's legal affairs, the contrast between "in-house" practice and the move back to private practice in London is very striking.

In my in-house role I was consistently busy on a range of matters of endless variety, and worked solidly within regular hours.

My experience of project based work in London is, that one works principally on one very large scale project at a time, working extremely long hours (including the odd "all nighter" or two!) with very tight deadlines and timeframes, leading to signing or completion of a deal, followed by a lull before the next deal in which one becomes involved.

One of the great advantages of working and being in London (once one gets used to the extraordinary cost of living over here – and becomes all too familiar with the discrepancy between the value of the Australian \$ and the English £ sterling) is the accessibility of the rest of Europe.

It would be fair to say that very few Australians who come here do not take the opportunity to travel extensively on long weekends and holidays to all sorts of obscure and interesting places all over Europe in a context where ducking over to Paris for the day becomes a bit like going up to Sydney, and the possibilities of going further afield are endless.