

# Trevor Choy Lawyers: A New Firm Order



By Matt Webber, Sparke Helmore

**W**e all know what life in a modern law firm is like. For years now partners have paid generous lip service to getting the work/life balance right, but the reality is that young lawyers' worth is measured in billable units. Could this be why young lawyers are leaving the profession in droves? Is there a better way? Trevor Choy, principal of boutique IP firm Choy Lawyers, has always thought so and, since hanging out his shingle three years ago, he has made it a priority to establish a new firm order.

To walk into Trevor Choy's Hardware Lane office is to take in a breath of fresh air. Visitors enter a light drenched and completely unpretentious open plan 'office without walls'. Trevor introduces me to his staff and there's not a single suit to be seen and everyone looks fresh and (dare I say it) happy.

I'm already thinking that he may be onto something...

Trevor's modern approach to practice is outlined in a series of what he calls "non-rules". In essence, these are a cluster of concepts designed to flatten the standard bureaucratic pyramid management structure of the traditional law firm.

For instance, employees can call for a salary review at any time. Choy avoids the adversarial approach to salary calculation. He prefers a system where employees prepare a personal proposal outlining what they think they should be paid and why. Salary is based purely upon an employee's abilities and financial and non-financial contribution. The usual factors, such as billings, market salary rates and years on the job, are irrelevant to a large degree. If you can justify your pitch, you'll get what you think you are worth.

"It's all about employees taking responsibility for themselves", Trevor says. "After all, a talented first year lawyer can easily outgun a bored third year. If people are left to self assess, their expectations will always be reasonable and they will never be disappointed. I haven't knocked anyone back... yet", he says through a broad grin.

This notion of honesty in communication is a significant feature of the Choy model. Trevor reinforces this by insisting upon an open plan office.

"In any office environment, things can get tense. People can misinterpret things that are said, or someone might get upset because of someone else's behaviour. But an open plan environment forces people to curb the comments and to think before they speak. There are no closed doors to hide behind, so the bitchy, gossipy element of office life is eliminated and a far more constructively critical environment prevails. Not only do people treat each other with professional respect and courtesy...but they also learn how to communicate and problem-solve far more effectively," he says.

This concept is not restricted to the internal aspects of the practice. Trevor encourages his team to think outside the square in their delivery of legal services. He says that "if a lawyer must provide written advice, we go by the rule that if the client's teenage child couldn't understand it, then it's not fit for client consumption."

That said, Trevor is adamant that the legal profession's attempts to communicate effectively with clients should not end with a commitment to the principles of Plain English writing skills. "Not everyone responds well to written communication. Sometimes a well written letter of advice

can totally miss its mark because the audience is not receptive to the medium," he says.

Trevor advocates the delivery of verbal advice and encourages his lawyers to think creatively about the forum in which advice is delivered. Some of his clients are advertisers, so it is not uncommon for advice to be delivered via a flip chart or a flow diagram over lunch.

"More often than not, that's the environment where they do their most effective work and where they best absorb concepts. Lawyers should be encouraged to use these environmental factors to their best advantage. Besides, it demystifies the profession by getting lawyers out from behind the safety of their desks and in amongst the realities of the commercial world."

Trevor is realistic about his ideas. His firm is a small one and the boutique nature of his firm's practice makes the implementation of his philosophies relatively simple. Things may change as his firm grows, but his commitment is unwavering.

"I have never understood how law firms have simply rolled along doing what they do. There is plenty of room for firms to change the way they think about their structures and their people. All I am doing is combining a bit of commercial adaptability with some basic common sense".

Let's hope others catch on! ■

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