

Delegatus in the time of coronavirus

Key success factors for a reinvented approach



In this second article of a [series of two](#), the author, president and founder of Delegatus, Pascale Pageau, shares the success factors that allowed this 100% Quebecois lawyers' collective to reinvent the business model of traditional law firms, a full 15 years before the current pandemic. A model that not only withstands the adverse effects of the pandemic but continues to grow. In this article: the structure and service approach.

A structure that comes with breathing room

There is no getting away from it, our collective needs the same kind of support infrastructure common to all firms: an office, support staff and technology. However, we use these resources differently, creating a true spirit of sustained collaboration and an extraordinary community of practice.

Downtown office? Think coworking!

As I explained in the first part of this series, I started this firm from scratch, at home. The first colleagues who joined me did the same. Initially, this new-wave legal start-up operated in a fragmented way, each one of us autonomous and at home. The decentralized nature of our business arrangement shaped our business philosophy, that is to be both entrepreneurs and lawyers.

Then, in 2009 we reached a critical mass of professionals. The fragmented virtual practice mode was no longer entirely sufficient to meet all our needs, so we had to find an actual place to hang our shingle. However, we wanted offices that would support our individual autonomy and would physically reflect our working styles as autonomous lawyer-entrepreneurs.

Our offices, located in Montreal's picturesque Old City, are a coworking concept featuring all the standard support services lawyers and clients can expect of a law firm. There are open workstations, closed offices for client meetings, meeting rooms and a splendid kitchen-cafeteria that converts into a functional training facility.

Lawyers and staff come in, on an as-needed basis. Unlike traditional offices, open-plan workspaces significantly reduce fixed costs. This flexibility in interior design allows us to offer a wide range of work environments that adapt to the needs of lawyers, employees and clients who sometimes have to travel for meetings. This is important because the needs of entrepreneurial lawyers are constantly changing. Some mandates are better suited to working alone, while others require the pooling of expertise and

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teamwork. The philosophy of our lawyer's collective also rejects the importance of a physical presence at work and relies on the freedom and autonomy left to lawyer-entrepreneurs.

Pooling Administrative Resources

Our ongoing quest for a simplified structure also extends to the organizational design of our support team. In traditional law firms, it is common for each partner to have their own separate administrative team, junior lawyers, articling students and paralegals. At Delegatus, we have opted for a lean structure where the core team acts as a "virtual personal team", supporting each individual

lawyer, according to his or her needs. It is an arrangement that has proved successful both with our lawyers and their clients.

Rather than traditional bricks and mortar, we choose to invest in more versatile collective resources with the sole aim of helping our lawyer-entrepreneurs be more efficient, stronger and more agile. Thus, the Growth and Marketing team assists our lawyers in their business development; the head of Culture and Talent supports them in their training and in the development of communities of practice; the Administrative Services team handles all administrative aspects of their practice, such as conflict checks, opening and closing files, billing and accounting, or IT support.

Technology and autonomous lawyers

The success of this “light” administrative approach is based on two essential characteristics common to our lawyer-entrepreneurs: autonomy and mastery of technology. From Day 1, we embraced such key virtual tools as remote billing, timekeeping and telecom platforms accessible via laptops, tablets and cell phones. Our lawyer-entrepreneurs are therefore fully capable of working from home, the client’s premises, the cottage, the office or anywhere else on the planet! It is actually the case for one of our learned colleagues. She works with her clients, practicing Quebec law, from the comfort of her office...slope-side in the mountains of British Columbia!

Another benefit coming out of our choice of technology is the significant improvement in productivity. The lawyers of our collective do not need assistants to enter their time, file documents, dictate letters or draft contracts and procedures. Their technical proficiency, combined with the right tools, allows them to gain productivity, save time, autonomy and gain more freedom.

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Our veterans are old hands at using virtual tools and our recruits are banking on mastering them quickly. To help them, we have developed a technological acclimatization process. Honed over 15 years of experience, it is so simple and effective that [we have managed to recruit and onboard new lawyers, in spite of the confinement!](#) The only drawback these days, is that you can't shake their hand or give them a hug. We will have to wait for the deconfinement.

Our streamlined structure makes it easier to work remotely day-in and day-out, and that has a very positive impact on our fixed costs. Centralizing administrative tools and resources allows

us to reduce fixed and administrative costs by as much as 75%, compared to a traditional law firm. Above all, it means we can use those savings to offer our lawyer-entrepreneurs more, in dollars and services. And “more” for the lawyers-entrepreneurs is “more” for the Collective. We truly believe that this is the best definition of “a winning relationship”.

The services approach

In 2005, when I was thinking of striking out on my own with what would eventually become Delegatus, I asked the following question of prospective clients (Small/medium-sized businesses, fast-growing companies, large companies):

“If you could rethink legal services for the benefit of your company, what would you change?”

Their answers are etched in my memory. Here are a few:

- Delivering quality work, on time.
- Having a realistic budget and sticking to it
- A practical understanding of their business
- Speaking their language, no legal mumbo-jumbo
- Reducing costs and optimizing efficiencies and expertise

These expectations have guided my actions and those of my colleagues since 2005. They have shaped a service approach in which clients are comfortable and happy to call on us. They work with experienced lawyers who speak the language of business, who are strategic, and who are not shy about going to their offices to work closely with them and their teams. We act without ego, advising and guiding our clients on small and big issues, opportunities and challenges.

The right to be **Legally Happy™** is real for our clients. That is why we trademarked it. It is a no-nonsense approach to delivering quality service, at very competitive costs, that delivers powerful added value. We have eliminated the cumbersome framework of the traditional law practice, so our clients have unfettered access to the experience, expertise and flexibility of seasoned professionals who are recognized and respected lawyers in their fields of practice.

Business and corporate lawyers

Experience is a core value and an absolute must for our clients so, on that score, we make no compromises. Ours is a select group. The average experience of our lawyer-entrepreneurs is 20 years. Even our youngest lawyer-entrepreneur has almost ten years of experience. Why this selection criteria? Because we want to live up to our “client happiness” promise, by offering them access to the best possible expertise and experience available.

Proximity that fuels innovation

Our desire to offer a closer relationship between the client and lawyer has spawned innovation in the way we deliver services to our clients. In 2007, we developed our In-house reinforcement service: experienced lawyers who work directly with the client, on their premises, as part of their own team. Our lawyers help build internal legal departments or provide specific expertise when there is need for additional in-house legal counsel support, for example if a company managing a surge in growth. This proximity allows us to offer clients a tailor-made solution, adapted specifically to their needs, as well as an exceptionally close and collaborative relationship.

That is thanks to our lean and agile structure, complemented by our collaborative and ego-free culture, eliminates costly intermediaries between the client and his lawyer. This results in a closer, more symbiotic relationship between them, a relationship that is clearly appreciated by our clients.

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Value for money

Offering cheaper rates was not my goal when I set out to create Delegatus. Price was never intended to be a significant differentiator for us. Our focus has always been to create ways of doing things that would allow us to practice better by practicing differently. Cost became incidental to our desire to innovate.

However, by giving our lawyer-entrepreneurs the freedom and the tools they need to balance their professional passion and their personal lives, Delegatus also created the environment to offer its differentiated services at highly competitive rates, sometimes up to 50% lower than those of larger law firms. This delights our clients and satisfies our lawyer-entrepreneurs. It is also a demonstration of the strength of the Collective. We think that is a textbook definition of a win-win relationship.

And the future?

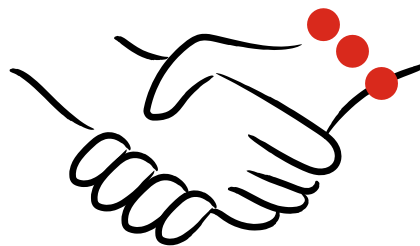
No one knows exactly what the post-COVID economy will look like. But I am very pleased to see that my decision to practice law differently has led to the development of a resilient business model that has not only withstood the crisis but has thrived in it. It has proven itself agile every day and has not only allowed us to get through this crisis but has even helped outpace the extraordinary growth rate of 25% that we had before confinement.

These three pillars – people, structure and service approach – have forged our business model, guiding us during the pandemic. They will be the engines that drive our growth after the crisis. This may not be the magic recipe for everyone, but I hope it may serve as a useful example to you, as you begin your own rebuilding process, to face today's “new normal”.

I want end this story by asking this question:

“As companies (all sectors combined), what can we do to emerge from this crisis better and more resilient than we were before? What can we learn from this experience that will inform the changes, transformations and innovations we can and must bring to our business models, in order to seize the opportunities that will surely arise from this experience?”

Innovation and creativity have always been inspirational drivers for me. The Collective is currently working on various projects to further benefit our lawyers-entrepreneurs, clients and employees. If the story of Delegatus has given you some leads to explore, so much the better. I firmly believe that being **Legally Happy** is a real and attainable goal, and I hope this series will help you get closer to achieving it.



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