

## CONTRACT WORKING

Tim Ryan, *Strategic Legal Solutions*

### Working as a contract lawyer: can you regain some balance?

Contract working, or "locum" working as it is sometimes referred to, has tended to be seen as the poorer cousin to working full-time in a law firm and striving for partnership, or in an in-house team rising through the ranks. However, changing attitudes, not just in law but in other professions too, mean that more and more progressive and talented lawyers are choosing to manage their careers differently.

There are various reasons why a good lawyer may choose to work on a contract basis and the specific reasons no doubt vary from individual to individual. However, among the most common reasons is the lack of opportunities to have a fulfilling and challenging career yet still maintain a work-life balance. An oft-heard complaint is that the sacrifices involved are just too great. Contract working gives lawyers the ability to be totally committed while working on an assignment, knowing that at the end of the assignment they are free to take time off and focus on other things, be it to travel, spend more time with the family or even write a novel, before they jump into the next challenging assignment. Another attraction may lie in the variety of work and environments that are on offer. Young lawyers today do not expect, or even wish, to spend their entire careers tied to one organisation.

Economic change and instability is another factor that may steer a lawyer towards pursuing contract legal work. Lawyers are increasingly becoming vulnerable to cycles of redundancy, often irrespective of their performance and abilities. The contract market can offer an attractive alternative for those who are not keen simply to rush into the next permanent position offered to them, and would instead prefer to be more selective and wait for the right position.

In the legal profession, quality is key. It is well known that quality people, working within a law firm or a business, are its greatest asset. Accordingly, contract lawyers must be talented people, who not only have the experience but also the personality to integrate well into a firm or company and become a committed member of the team for the duration of their contract. A candidate must typically be able to "hit the ground running", often with little supervision and in an environment where there may not be the lead-in time typically allowed in permanent positions. Such work can be professionally challenging and extremely rewarding. The success

and reputation of a contract lawyer will depend on the ability of that lawyer to be a valued member of the team for as long as his/her skills are needed by the team. For employers, this ability to bring in talented contract lawyers on an as-needed basis allows them to properly resource cases and projects without needing to resort to inefficient, demoralising and often expensive "boom/bust" recruitment methods, and as such, it is becoming a valuable resourcing tool.

Top-tier firms and businesses in the US have been using contract lawyers as a matter of course for almost ten years, the benefits having been widely recognised and the mechanics tried and tested. Strategic Legal Solutions, a leading US legal placement firm, opened its London office in 2001 ([www.slslondon.com](http://www.slslondon.com)). Founded and managed by former City partners and lawyers, SLS offers its London based candidates and clients the opportunities and benefits that have long been enjoyed by their counterparts in the US.

