

CONTRACT WORK— IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?

It seems like more and more attorneys are looking for ways to combine their legal background with a different quality of life, whether for a defined short period of time or permanently. For many, turning to the world of temporary legal work offers a viable solution.

At the City Bar program, "Is a Contract, Staff or Discovery Attorney Position Right for You?" sponsored by the Career Advancement and Management Committee (chaired by Tanya Gill), the panel offered attendees advice on navigating the complex world of temporary legal work. The program was moderated by Ronald Singh of Lazare Potter Giacomis & Kranjac LLP and the panelists were Lori Freudenberger, Thelen Reid Brown Raysman & Steiner LLP; Scott Krowitz, Lexolution LLC; Gianpaolo Scarola, Contract Attorney; and Diana St. Louis, Update Legal.

The panelists presented their experiences, and discussed the ins and outs of temporary legal work.

Why Temporary Legal Work?

There are countless reasons why someone would choose to pursue temporary legal work. For many it provides the freedom to pursue other interests or build a business while still being involved in the legal world. Others use it to supplement their income while they look for a job or decide what their next career move will be. Still others desire more time to meet family needs and want the flexibility of working less than full time. There is no one right reason to decide on temporary legal work but before deciding whether temporary legal work is right for you there are a number of issues to consider.

Kinds of Temporary Legal Work

Being a contract attorney is an hourly rate position. The jobs are typically found through an agency and salaries are paid by the agency. In

addition, agencies often offer some degree of benefits such as health insurance, malpractice insurance and retirement accounts while the attorney is working on a project.

Contract attorneys are generally brought in to work for a limited period of time in order to meet a temporary staffing need or to assist on a specific matter. Sometimes a contract attorney is there to provide expertise not available at the firm. These types of opportunities are typically available only to a more experienced lawyer who has gained substantive knowledge or a specialized skill.

Contract attorneys who work as staff or discovery attorneys are permanent employees of the firm or corporation but typically are off-track. They are billed out at a different rate and follow a different salary scale than associates. In addition, staff/discovery attorneys have a defined limited role within the firm.

Role of a Contract Attorney

For recent law graduates or lawyers practicing one to three years much of the work available to the contract attorney is discovery and document review. (As mentioned above, lawyers with more experience or with a specialized skill could find themselves doing more substantive legal work.) The daily responsibilities of discovery and document review include looking through numerous documents, spotting issues and deciding which documents fall under the attorney/client privilege. Though this can be tedious and dry work, the panel reminded everyone that it can also build skills such as being detail-oriented and meticulous and working in a fast-paced environment.

While being a contract attorney is desirable for many reasons, the panel urged attendees to think about some of the issues which could make contract work less desirable for some. Most contract attorneys are over-qualified for this type of work and need to be accepting of that before agreeing to take on a project. Contract attorneys should also be prepared to report to someone more junior than themselves. A contract attorney should be someone who is at ease walking into new situations and meeting new people with each new assignment. Contract attorneys work under less than desirable circumstances and must be comfortable in the same close quarters day after day.

Finding a Job as a Contract Attorney

Most contract work comes through legal staffing agencies. The panel suggested those seeking contract work contact several different agencies. The availability of work may fluctuate so in order to maintain a regular income it helps to have more than one staffing agency working for you.

Be up front with the agency. Let them know what type of project you are seeking, long term or short term. Are you willing and able to take on a project that is seven days a week? Are you willing to work weekends; come in early and stay late, or do family obligations make that difficult? By being open with the staffing agency you are more likely to be staffed on the project that works best for you.

Although a benefit of being a contract attorney is flexibility, remember a temporary job is still a job and like with any other professional relationship you should try to limit your time away. Also be sure to keep your resume current so the staffing agency can avoid any conflicts of interest as you move from case to case and firm to firm.

The panel agreed that the rate of pay for contract attorneys varies widely, with hourly rates for a newly-admitted attorney being anywhere from \$35 - \$45 while an experienced attorney working on a substantive matter could earn \$60 - \$125 per hour. For those who see contract work as a career the yearly income can also be considerable.

Although working as temporary attorney or staff attorney might be a good way to check out the culture of a firm, unless a project is specifically noted as temporary to permanent most temporary positions don't yield offers of permanent positions. If you are looking for a permanent position it is better, advises the panel, to use the flexibility of the temporary situation to search for a full-time job elsewhere.

Whether your objective is to make a transition, bring in a salary, reenter the work force or simply to have more control over your time, contract attorney positions may be a great way for you to meet these goals.