

Clerksroom - how does it work?

By Delia Venables

Clerksroom (www.clerksroom.com) is a virtual chambers but it has a very real physical presence as well. It started in 2001 and now administers the practices of 65 barristers specialising in privately paid civil law, particularly in private client civil work, family & children, local government and employment law. Over 50,000 sets of instructions have been received in five years.

The number of barristers is likely to grow to 100 by the end of 2006 with major developments planned in London, the North West and North East. Given that barristers have to be earning at least £100,000 a year to be accepted, this is quite an achievement. There is a waiting list to join.

In addition, Clerksroom has focussed on the growing demand in the UK for alternative dispute resolution. As a result, as the first Accredited Mediation Provider under the Civil Mediation Council's regime, it offers over 440 mediators and 170 arbitrators to the UK, European and international marketplace.

The physical presence is provided by a 6,000 square foot new-build premises based in Taunton, by the M5, occupied by 15 clerks and a fee and administration staff. Services are available over the telephone and through the Internet - anywhere in the world. For example, barristers can access their diaries at any time and from anywhere, as well as case information and full financial records. There is also an extensive online library.

Barristers are clerked at a flat rate of 10% of fees collected subject to a minimum standing order of £500 + VAT per calendar month. There are no other costs, no politics and no chambers meetings!

Clerksroom carries out marketing for barristers but they stress that, ultimately, barristers are free standing, self employed professionals responsible for developing their own practices. There is however a web presence with full cv for each barrister and an individual email address.

Software is provided by leading Bar supplier Meridian Law and standards of Data Protection and confidentiality have been checked by the Bar Council. The IT is managed by Freedom2000 and the software is web enabled so Counsel can log into their diary, cases, aged debt, payment summaries or any other professional information via a simple Internet connection.

Logistics

Counsel work from home. The clerks (at Taunton) manage all incoming telephone calls, incoming faxes, email, DX and post. Briefs are entered onto the computer system and forwarded to Counsel's home DX boxes. Faxes, emails and non-urgent messages are dealt with by the staff or forwarded to Counsel via the email system as appropriate. Telephone enquiries that require a response from Counsel are transferred directly to Counsel's home or mobile telephone from our switchboard. Cheques are banked directly into Counsel's bank account, weekly. Members sign a Service Level Agreement prior to joining.

Joint heads of chambers are Jonathan Dingle and Harry Hodgkin, the former a personal injury specialist and the latter a High Court commercial property barrister.

Note: as of March 1st, Clerksroom has taken over the premises previously occupied by 199 Strand, with

conference facilities, a mediation suite, associated IT and a video link system to Taunton. This continues the dual approach - virtual and real - adopted by Clerksroom. Many of the former tenants of 199 Strand have also joined Clerksroom.

Jonathan Dingle writes further:

Is Clerksroom a virtual chambers? Perhaps, in the sense that it does not have traditional paper diaries or rooms for its members, it does not have chambers committee meetings and there is certainly no tea at four. All the data is stored remotely on servers through Mountain software and can be accessed on any computer, anywhere in the world given a few protocol phrases, passwords and key log on plug-ins. It also operates 24/7 and provides access to a virtual library.

But the chambers is very real: the Taunton headquarters incorporates a mediation centre opened by Lord Browne-Wilkinson in March 2004 and state of the art wireless and other technology for those using the conference rooms. It connects to the web by fibre optic cables and there is a control centre feel about the main clerks room with its clocks telling the time from Hong Kong to Toronto - as well as in Somerset (although perhaps you need to subtract a decade in the latter case...). It is a design that will be replicated in other parts of the country shortly, offering local facilities to members and (as importantly) clients and solicitors.

The process appeals to barristers with families and the technology, which includes phone call forwarding and internet calling, makes this completely achievable. The use of fax to email numbers, and scanners, allows us to scan in briefs and papers and have them on counsel's desktop seconds later wherever they are in the world. For example, we have one senior member who has turned round urgent Particulars of Claim from the beach in Barbados while on holiday using the system. The only thing he dreads is the greater use of video conferencing which will give his location away!

Is all this too impersonal? We do not think so. As well as email and phone contacts, there is a strong social element with evenings and dinners arranged, especially in London, and while it cannot entirely replace the face-around-the-door that traditional chambers offer, it is clear that the use of technology offers strong support for counsel. That said, we do not take pupils anymore (last time out, we were overwhelmed by over 1,000 applications - how could we properly staff that, and then justify paying pupils?) and we do not take junior members of the Bar until they have established practises.

We believe we have a successful formula, a happy team and a strong clerking base. Is this the future of the Bar - not for some, certainly, but as silks like Robin de Wilde, Michael Powers and Tony Bueno have shown, it is one that many at all levels think is the happiest way to enjoy the best profession.