

WHILE THEY'RE SLEEPING

Australia is fast becoming a destination for legal process outsourcing, writes **Angela Priestley**

Usually, when one thinks of a legal process outsourcing (LPO) destination, locations like India, South Africa and the Philippines spring to mind.

But Australia is increasingly being seen as a good alternative.

We do, after all, have an abundance of UK-experienced lawyers, an ability to offer legal services at a rate of almost 50 per cent of that charged by UK firms, and the provision to offer what is now being seen as a convenient time difference (given that work in Australia can be completed while UK lawyers are asleep).

Nicola Stott, a director of Exigent, says her business – which provides back office legal-related work to law firms from Rockingham, Western Australia – has quadrupled over the last 18 months.

With UK firms like Eversheds and Linklaters already outsourcing to our shores, as well as Exigent's second base in Cape Town, South Africa, Stott is preparing to significantly grow the Rockingham base to cope with an expected further increase in demand.

"In the last four weeks, two of the top 15 [UK] firms have started doing due diligence [to use Exigent services] down here," Stott told

Lawyers Weekly.

Stott added that interest in Exigent from Australian law firms is also increasing.

"Australian firms have taken longer to embrace LPO," she says.

"But we currently have proposals out to 12 of the top 20 law firms."

Meanwhile, Australian law firms also like the idea of outsourcing back-office legal-related work out of their own offices, and out of capital cities. But rather than sending such work offshore, some Australian firms are realising the benefits and peace-of-mind of keeping such work onshore.

Already, Exigent is working with Australian clients like Swaab Attorneys, Lavan Legal and Herbert Geer to assist with general legal-secretarial type duties.

Not all clients, however, wish to be publicly recognised as retaining the services of an LPO provider – especially given that the move to outsourcing is often aligned with downsizing.

At Eversheds, for example, entering outsourcing arrangements with Exigent resulted in the loss of up to 100 support jobs. Stott notes that this was a strategic move that not only saved the firm 2 million pounds, but also allowed the

"In the last four weeks, two of the top 15 [UK] firms have started doing due diligence [to use Exigent services] down here"

firm to enable 24-hour back office support.

Stott says that in Australia, local firms are more willing to commit to outsourcing if the work can be kept on our shores. "That way all the jobs are for Australians, and there's the same time-zone, same culture," she says.

And locally, Stott said she has not seen blatant job cutting occur as a result of taking up Exigent services, but rather jobs not being replaced when staff leave.

Jeremy Szwider, founder of outsourced virtual in-house lawyer service, Bespoke Law, which has also recently entered into a strategic alliance with Exigent, says it makes sense that Australia should increasingly be seen as a worthwhile location for LPO from the UK.

Currently, for a business like Bespoke, it helps that Australian lawyers continue to return home from legal jobs in the UK. "We have an influx of high quality lawyers who have returned from the UK, who have practised there and have maybe had to leave the UK because of the current economic environment," Szwider explains. "We're tapping into that, and we're servicing London clients or in-house legal departments here from Australia, at Australian rates – which are effectively half the UK rates."

Finally, it seems Australia's time zone is actually working for us, rather than against us. "I've turned the time zone problem into a positive where we're in Australia, we still work around the clock, but you wake up in the morning and the work is done," Szwider says.

