

IT'S TIME TO SHARPEN THE SAW: WHY I'M GOING IT ALONE IN HR

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At an age when many of us might be contemplating retirement, long-standing HR Inner Circle member Patrick McNamee decided it was time to embark on a new career. Already head of employment law at a London solicitor practice, he's now launched his own HR consultancy, offering support to both employers and employees. Here he explains why he made this choice and what he aims to achieve with Lamplight HR.

I'm not one to offer tips for life, apart from maybe 'never run with scissors'. I don't jump at opportunities or even create them, but I do get frustrated when I think something could be improved. This tale of the tree cutter in the forest sums up what I often encounter. A man says: 'Hey, your saw is blunt. If you sharpened it, you could cut through the wood three times faster.' The woodcutter replies: 'Yeah, but I don't have the time.'

That is the closest I have managed to being able to explain why at 65 I started my own consultancy, Lamplight HR: I want the saw sharpened!

Fellow HR Inner Circle members will know me best as head of employment law at Hadfield Bull & Bull Solicitors based in south-east London – and nothing's changing there. In fact, it was the senior partner who agreed we can't get businesses interested in obtaining HR advice from a firm of solicitors. When I said I would like to start my own consultancy, he couldn't have been more supportive.

It's been the same within HR Inner Circle: I've lost count of the offers of help I've received since announcing my plans.

Where do I plan to take Lamplight HR? I am told, so I suppose it is true, my whole working career has been in some way about assisting people. Don't get me wrong, it was never for free, but I think it was borne of not seeing injustice going unchallenged. My target market is small businesses with up to 30 staff, charities, and individuals.

Once I'd settled on the name, the rest followed fairly easily – branding, website, professional indemnity insurance, registering with the Information Commissioners Office. I've also joined a

local networking group, which has led me to take a look at podcasting.

So I have ended up at the same point as many others who have taken the plunge to go it alone, even though my journey here was not a traditional one.

I was an army brat, my education was fragmented to say the least, and two days after my 18th birthday, I applied to join the London Fire Brigade as a fireman (as they were called then). I stayed for 17 or so years, during which I acquired something of 'a reputation' as a Fire Brigades Union rep.

At 22, I was elected as a London divisional secretary, representing 500 members in nine stations, which equated to being a national official, but quit four years later when the union refused to assist six members.

I was for some years a union 'accused's friend', and among those I represented were the six union-rejected members in their disciplinary hearings. They engaged their own legal team, and during a pause at an appeal being heard at the Greater London Council, their barrister leaned over and said: 'You love this, don't you?' I nodded. He said: 'You're good at it. Why don't you study law?'

So I did, part-time for the next six years, with the LFB paying some of the fees. However, my lack of a basic education was reflected in a poor degree. I was a better practitioner than academic.

Meanwhile, I'd had my dramas as a firefighter, and one injury ended my career. I was medically retired on a pension at 35 and went on to volunteer at what was then called the 'Citizens Advice Bureau'. While there, I was employed to run a national CAB helpline for seafarers for 10 years.

I later spent two years working for a law firm handling welfare benefits and debt work under a legal aid franchise, and from there went to a law centre where I had the employment remit. It was here I first encountered Daniel Barnett's email circulars, around 2007.

Then it was on to where I am now – Hadfield Bull & Bull solicitors where I am head of employment law and HR manager.

So, not an entirely conventional road to setting up an HR consultancy, but I learned so much along the way. I was a low-ranking officer in the LFB and new recruits would need looking after when they joined the shift. There were a couple of occasions I berated them for not 'reading the signs' and putting themselves in harm's way. It was for their own good because sometimes there are no second chances.

Any profession where people you work with can get seriously injured doesn't seamlessly translate to an office environment, but the principles are the same.

We had a volunteer solicitor in the CAB who would ask my opinion, much as my current boss does – it still surprises me! They both said that coming from a trade union background, I approach issues differently. Who knew?

The CAB solicitor said: 'We deny everything, concede nothing and threaten.' Don't ask what exactly I do, but I'm sure it is a vastly different approach, and it seems to work.

For me appearance matters, whether it's the suit and tie, the fire service kit, or indeed the website. People are fickle and looking professional is half the battle of being listened to

and taken seriously – it's why so many people are scammed by men in suits.

Who we are, what our life experiences are, matter. It determines who we pitch to. A business massively opposed to unions won't use me, and I can live with that. Though I think I could also persuade them why they definitely should!

Am I hedging my bets or having my cake and eating it by staying in my role at Hadfield Bull & Bull? In my view, neither. There is a clear line between both roles, and I would argue one complements the other – Lamplight is likely to generate work for HBB and vice-versa.

If you are confident enough to advise, you already have the tools to set up your own practice. It actually feels more than OK doing this – exciting, in fact!



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