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As attorneys in New York retire for the day, it's the start of a fresh cycle of legal work for Mumbai lawyer Dhiraj Merchant. But the 28-year-old does not wear the lawyer's black coat. Nor does he walk into courtrooms or argue cases. He never wanted to.

Instead, based on the previous evening's conference call with a US client, a formally dressed Merchant already knows his tasks for the day - processing medical insurance claims for employees in the US or reviewing contracts that his team has worked on for a UK company.

For instance, employees of many US firms are eligible for health insurance benefits. But before the firm can process a request, it needs to check various documents. These checks are now being outsourced to India. So on a given day, Merchant's team might pore over an American's medical records, his or her medical insurance policies and other documents to determine whether and exactly what he or she is entitled to get.

A law graduate, Merchant belongs to the country's young legal process outsourcing sector, whose annual revenue is forecast to reach \$640 million by 2010. It is a sector where legal departments of companies and other organisations based in the US or Europe outsource work to India, and pay half the price they would have had they done it in-house or outsourced in their countries.

The sector is booming, as evident from Merchant's career graph. It took him four months of deliberation to pick this career. But four years after joining Mindcrest (India), he's not looking back. He carries the title of legal manager and takes home a six-figure salary every month.

"That's a 400 percent jump from the time I joined the firm in 2004," he said, sitting in his Prabhadevi office. "Starting my own legal practise or becoming a successful counsel would take a lot of time. I was impatient. I wanted to make money early."

For someone who worked alongside 100 others in solicitor firm Crawford Bayley, while pursuing his law degree at the Government Law College, the shift to legal offshoring firm wasn't easy.

To begin with, for the first six months at work, Merchant, who lives on Marine Drive with his parents, wife and his brother's family, worked from a 600-square-foot office that was once a flat in Bandra, with just six employees. "Initially, I was not sure if I was doing the right thing," he said. "But my gut feeling said I had scope to grow in a small team. So I took the chance."

Moreover, he found the opportunity to understand the laws of other countries, such as the US, UK and Canada, and interact with overseas clients so early in career appealing.

He also interacts directly with Fortune 500 companies based in US, UK, Canada, Australia.

Into the unknown

When Merchant got a call for an interview in July 2004, not many people knew what the industry was about. Not even Merchant. "I myself did a lot of reading up on the legal outsourcing industry," he said. "For me, it was like testing the waters. But it's turned out to be a good experience."

Cutting short his plans to become a chartered accountant like his elder brother Deepesh, Merchant was fortunate that his family, his father who is an investor in stocks and securities and a homemaker mother, supported his decision.

Merchant started off as an associate-legal support service in November 2004, drafting documents and doing legal research. Leading four projects simultaneously, Merchant became a project attorney by end-2005. A year later, he became legal manager heading 40 people.

"Four years is the longest that any employee has worked in the sector (given how young the sector is," said Rohan Dalal, managing director of Mindcrest (India).

"Having worked on multiple projects and encapsulated multi-cultural sensibilities, Dhiraj has helped the company grow. As we reward performance, stories like Dhiraj will be frequent."

Had it been a traditional law firm, Merchant many not have moved up the ladder so quickly. "An old, reputed law firm means good experience, and looks good on the resume, but career growth is slow and they are not good pay masters," Merchant said. "Besides, you need a godfather to get cases."

Merchant, whose uncle is a leading solicitor, wanted to make it on his own. "I could have given his reference but decided against it," he said.

Day Four to Day One

Merchant's growth has mirrored the company's. From just six employees in 2004, Mindcrest today has 450 employees on its roll, a head office in Chicago and another office in Pune.

"I have interviewed up to ninety per cent of the firm's employees," he said.

Indeed, when he is not drafting contracts or reviewing project proposals, he is actively involved in the recruitment process, to which he devotes about two months in a year in all. About a week every month, Merchant commutes to Pune to meet clients, conduct interviews and train new recruits.

Then, from November to March, Merchant, who loves travelling and going on long drives, visits law schools in Delhi, Jodhpur, Goa, Chennai, Kolkata, Bangalore, Pune, Nagpur, Mysore and Hyderabad.

[In his free time, he helps his wife Divya with her jewellery exhibitions.]

The way the industry is growing, Merchant's recruiting responsibilities are only set to increase. But his job might also get tougher, as competition for talent will also increase.

At least four big companies are entering the field every year, experts say. The upside is that more law graduates are opting for careers in the sector.

Pangea3, a company that went from 15 employees in early 2005 to 250 in 2007, made 100 offers to law students, double last year's figure. It expects to have 450 employees on its roll by the year-end. "From getting placement slots in the fourth week in 2005, this year we got a slot on day one itself," said Sanjay Kamrani.

First-name culture

Unlike in the business process outsourcing industry, employees do not wear headsets and answer calls every few minutes. A firm in this sector works like any other law firm involved in drafting documents and patent applications, conducting legal research and reviewing contracts.

The sector teems with law graduates in their 20s and 30s from diverse backgrounds -- from metros like Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai to states such as Kashmir and Mizoram. They pore over thousands of pages by day and then head to a restaurant or pub in the evening.

For security reasons, an employee in this sector cannot take work home.

There are designations and hierarchies at the workplace, but the atmosphere is informal, and most firms have an open-door policy -- not only can one approach one's boss without hesitation and people call each other, including their seniors, by their first names.

While most clients based in the US, law firms in UK, Canada and Australia are also outsourcing their work to India.

Talking to these clients day-after-day helps build a strong relation between them and the attorneys. They may even end up discussing personal relationships, family, work and the weather. "It is professional till the point of work," said Merchant. But when clients visit India, lawyers like Merchant accompany them for dinner and even show them around the city.