



HUMAN RESOURCES
LAW AND ADVOCACY

Leading law firm Hicks Morley celebrates 10 years in Kingston

Earlier this month, Hicks Morley celebrated the 10th anniversary of its Kingston office, the location responsible for serving the firm's Kingston-area clients as well as its many other clients in Eastern Ontario.

From its roots as a small firm with a single Toronto office in 1972, Hicks Morley has grown to become Canada's leading human resources law and advocacy firm, with over 100 lawyers serving the legal needs of employers from five Ontario offices – in Kingston, Ottawa, Toronto, London and Waterloo.



Kingston beginnings

The Kingston office was established in 1999, when Kees Kort, Vince Panetta and Sophia Duguay left their previous firm and relocated under the Hicks Morley name on the third floor of the Royal Block building. Together with Colin Youngman, the four lawyers recently met in their boardroom to reminisce and reflect on the last decade.

"Our clients expect practical advice and common sense solutions – fast," said Kort. "And no matter where we're located in the province, we can do that. Our central Knowledge Management Group ensures we're up-to-date on the law and we can draw on expertise as needed firm-wide."

It's that combination of a local presence with the country's top legal thinking that makes the difference for clients.

"We're really able to bring the resources of Bay Street to Eastern Ontario and beyond," said Panetta. "When we combine that knowledge base with our local insights, it's a powerful combination that really helps our clients develop strategies and approaches that can address virtually any human resources issue."

A community focus

All four lawyers started their legal careers in Eastern Ontario and have put down roots in the community. Their knowledge of the area enables them to develop homegrown strategies and solutions.

Firm members pride themselves on regularly giving back to the community. Vince Panetta teaches a course for the Queen's Executive MBA Program, and Lisa Mills (Ottawa office) and Rachel Arbour (Toronto office) teach a pension law course at the Queen's Law School. All of the lawyers regularly give their time to moot competitions at both the School of Business and the Law School. Colin Youngman is the President of the Board of Directors of Big Brothers/Big Sisters Kingston, Frontenac, Lennox & Addington, and is also a Board member of the Human Resources Professionals Association – Kingston District Chapter.

The fact that Lisa Mills and Rachel Arbour – two lawyers from two different offices – teach a course at a university in the city of a third Hicks Morley office exemplifies one of the firm's strengths.

"Our information technology and the vast databanks eliminate distance as a factor in our practice," said Duguay. "We can rely on the expertise of any of the lawyers anywhere throughout the firm as the need arises."

Growing areas of practice

In terms of the firm as a whole, Hicks Morley is organized into 11 Practice Areas, each of which concentrate on a particular element of human resources law. Notable among the areas are the Pension and Benefits Practice Group, the Pay Equity Practice Group and the Information and Privacy Practice Group.

"When we joined Hicks Morley 10 years ago, issues in these areas rarely surfaced," noted Panetta. "Today, they show up in virtually everything we do. I regularly consult members of these Practice Groups for advice while negotiating collective agreements. And in today's economic climate, negotiations involving pensions and benefits are particularly sensitive. We have an unbelievably talented Pension and Benefits Group, and it's reassuring to know that I can rely on their expertise when the issues are raised by the unions at the bargaining table."

The firm also has established Industry Groups to address unique aspects of the various sectors of the economy. Duguay, who is a member of the firm's Healthcare and Social Services Industry Groups with an emphasis on the long-term care sector, noted that each sector has unique issues that must be taken into account when helping clients. And that's the advantage of an "Industry Group" approach to the firm's knowledge sharing.

"Healthcare unions all have provincial agendas," says Duguay, one of the firm's many bilingual lawyers. "As a member of the firm's Healthcare Group, I'm able to keep up with what's going on provincially. I then can combine this information with our local knowledge of what's happening in the sector to fashion homegrown strategies and solutions."

A team approach

The firm's culture is focused on ensuring that clients are served by the lawyer who is best suited for the job – and there's firm-wide respect for the unique skills and expertise that each of Hicks Morley's 100-plus lawyers can contribute. The complexity of a client's issue is also always taken into account in determining whether the file is handled by a senior partner or a junior associate.

"We work as a team, and while that sounds like a simple concept, it really takes a special type of firm to execute well," said Youngman. "I know that whenever I have a question or need advice, a more senior lawyer is readily available for consultation on any issue that I need to address."

The firm's blend of local knowledge and province-wide expertise brings a unique service to the area's employers in a time when human resources issues are front and centre.

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