

Juno Legal model focuses on flexibility for both lawyers and clients

Geoff Adlam - Fri, 18 Dec 2020

When Helen Mackay set up Juno Legal in 2016 she focused on creating a business which delivered specialist in-house legal support in the most flexible and responsive ways for both the lawyers and the clients.

As one of New Zealand's "NewLaw" firms, Juno seems to have realised this vision. It's just taken on its 22nd lawyer and last week at the 2020 New Zealand Law Awards, Juno Legal won the Artemis Executive Recruitment Employer of Choice (<50 lawyers) award.

"I saw challenges in two ways. I met a lot of lawyers who felt either excluded from the profession or they felt they couldn't practise and balance everything else going on in their lives – whether it was other passions and interests, child care, elder care or other things they wanted to do which didn't sit comfortably with a legal career," says Mackay.

"And then a lot of clients were saying to me 'we really need more flexible and agile resource; we need people we can parachute into our business to help with projects and then kind of flex out'. So the two sides, demand and supply, were really sitting in front of me and all I had to do was create a platform that made both of them work."

Before establishing Juno, Mackay had been with the New Zealand Law Society for seven years as President and then CEO of the In-house Lawyers Association of New Zealand. Before that she had worked in-house here and in the UK with New Zealand Oil & Gas, Vector, Natural Gas Corporation, Novartis UK, Nestle UK and the Electricity Corporation of New Zealand.

"NewLaw"

There was a lot of work involved in setting up a new model for delivering legal services. Mackay had plenty of in-house experience and excellent contacts but had never worked in a law firm. NewLaw firms supply their lawyers to organisations or other firms on demand, with the flexibility to change as work ebbs or flows.

Juno is one of the pioneers. There are around a dozen NewLaw firms in New Zealand, most very small. In May 2020 they had 67 lawyers between them. While the overseas-owned LOD's New Zealand operation is rumoured to be closing and another foreigner, Legal Vision, is still to provide details of its planned entry here, the New Zealand firms like Juno appear to have weathered the Covid-19 storm well.

The name Mackay chose reflects her vision: "Juno was the Roman goddess of family and protector of the State and that was a nice balance between our dual purposes which are to look after our lawyers and to look after our clients. Her role was also

that of special counsellor, which seemed particularly pertinent to me for a team of in-house lawyers.”

A new legal services model also was a bit perplexing for the Law Society.

“I think the regulator took a little while to understand what we were offering and asked some curious questions. I think before Covid-19 the Law Society still had a mentality that you needed a marble office from where you delivered services from on high.”

The vision in operation

Ready to go, Mackay says she was fortunate in that she managed to find two or three “fantastic” people who brought their own profiles and their own networks to the new firm.

“Three days after we launched we got our first big client, which was Auckland Council. I spent most of the next few months helping them with the design and strategy for their in-house legal function. They had 65 in-house lawyers and they spoke really highly of us after we did that work, and we really took off from there.”

Juno seems to have quickly settled into its chosen place.

“The in-house legal community has been incredibly welcoming, with lots of support and lots of encouragement – whether in terms of direct instructions or referrals and just encouragement in general,” Mackay says.

“And we’ve also had lots of support from the big law firms. I think they’ve really seen us as complementary to what they do. We get lots of referrals from big firms, which I guess is a sign for me that the system is a mature one and people see that as lawyers we should concentrate on the whole market and not worry so much about competing in our niche.”

The changing legal services market

With the entry of more and more competing consultancy firms prepared to work in all areas, Mackay believes lawyers must really focus on more than just delivering legal services: “They have to say to their clients, what is your problem and how can we solve it?”

“As on demand models of delivery have become more common - whether it’s your meal kit getting delivered to your house, whether it’s Netflix streaming - people understand that you can get the service that you want which is right size with the needs that you have.

“I think people have been saying for a long time that law firms deliver the services that they want to deliver; not necessarily the services that their customers want to receive. So we’ve found clients have been really hungry for what we’re able to deliver.”

The Juno working environment

With a team of 22 lawyers and two other legal professionals in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch, flexibility remains key at Juno.

“I think most law firms and most lawyers can see that what we are trying to achieve for our people is something actually worth supporting and worth celebrating - that people can be lawyers and also give to their community and have their own side business, or look after children.”

Juno has a premises on Lambton Quay in Wellington, which is the base for Mackay, a practice manager and an administrator. It's also available for anyone in the firm “but most of them are based out at the client, working from home, where they need to be, or travelling.”

Mackay says the firm focus is not so much on growth or size, but about what the market wants.

“It's also about keeping true to our mantra, which is the best of the best. So, when we recruit, we want only the very very best lawyers, the best in-house lawyers we can find. And we don't want to grow faster than we can find talented people. We're still turning work down, but we want to be really careful to grow in a balanced way so we look after the team, we look after our clients.”

The lockdown bonus for in-house lawyers

As with everyone, the Covid-19 lockdown presented some major challenges to Juno and its lawyers and clients. Work for aviation and retail clients tailed off quickly. Juno's lawyers who came off client work were moved on to business development and keeping in touch with the changing needs of the client base.

Three lawyers worked on developing the precedents library, and Juno has now released the Juno Resource Library to the market. It includes a clause bank, common precedents and advisory resources which are specifically tailored to the needs of in-house legal teams. Juno has made them free to use, adapt and share for in-house lawyers or in-house contract managers.

“It's kind of our gift to them,” says Mackay. “I think post-Covid our foundations are probably stronger, as a team we're better connected. We were doing weekly team meetings on MS Teams so we got to know each other better because we're geographically distributed.”

Pride in the achievement

It's very clear that Mackay is very proud of the team that has been built over three and a half years.

“I think all of us can take responsibility for that because starting with fantastic people has attracted more fantastic people and it's grown from there. So it's certainly not

down to me – I think as a team everyone is really collaborative and supportive of each other, and we do a lot of peer review and internal support.

“I guess I’m also really proud that we’re often able to help people in situations where they do have pressing needs. I got an email at 6:15 this morning from a General Counsel who had a particular need that I can help her solve. I think that if she’s awake at 6:15 worrying about the problem that she’s got and I can help her with that, then I’m actually proud of that.

“I think the role of a General Counsel is such a big role now that they really need to pull in support where they can. It’s a demanding and high pressure role, so being able to alleviate a bit of that pressure, we’re actually doing a good thing.”