

Last update: January 22, 2007 – 8:32 PM

## National legal headhunter firm captures Esquire Group

By Neal St. Anthony, Star Tribune

Nearly two decades ago, Patricia Comeford, a young associate litigator at a Twin Cities law firm, decided that she didn't want a career built around courthouse brawls.

So she quit in 1989 and, equipped with a computer and a telephone, opened the Esquire Group, a headhunter company for law firms and companies seeking attorneys and legal-support staff that has grown to be the largest independent outfit in these parts.

Today, Special Counsel, the legal-headhunting business of Florida-based MPS Group, will announce that it has "headhunted" the Minneapolis headhunter. Special Counsel, with operations in about 20 major cities, thus gains entry into the Twin Cities market. Terms were not disclosed.

"We weren't looking to sell," said Comeford, sole shareholder in the 14-person company. "We've had offers in the past by others but didn't feel their business model fit with ours or our clients. This is hard because we're a close-knit group at Esquire. I also knew it was the right thing to do -- because [Special Counsel] is a first-class operation that understands the legal industry and doesn't use a cookie-cutter model."

In an interview, John Marshall, president of Special Counsel, said he wanted Esquire because "Pat Comeford has on her team the people we want and would hire." For us, it's about culture, Marshall said. "They offer the full suite of services, permanent and temporary placement and outsource-document review. And her company is a microcosm of what Special Counsel is all over the country."

Special Counsel has offered jobs to everybody at Esquire.

Comeford, 47, has agreed to stay as a consultant for a year. And she and Gina Sauer, the Esquire Group marketing director and another recovering lawyer, will spin out their career-counseling business, as "You're Never Stuck Inc."

The two, gifted writers, codified that business in a 2006 book called "Headhunter with a Heart," which deals with the emotional as well as professional and financial issues of career change.

Timothy Mahoney, a veteran lawyer and in-house counsel, will stay on as chief operating officer of what will become the Minneapolis office of Special Counsel.

Tom Keller, a senior partner at Moss & Barnett, recalled on Monday that he thought Comeford had guts to quit the law-firm business when she knew it wasn't right for her. She sought him for advice in 1988.

"She had the nerve to do it, and I've seen so many lawyers who have serious doubts, but it takes years to face up to the fact to get out and do something else, and some never do," he said. "I was uncertain how much of a market there would be for her ... but I try and make a habit of not stepping on people's dreams. I kept my mouth shut, fortunately."

Comeford had a knack for understanding cultures and seeking talent. Search firms charge up to a third of first-year pay for talent, so a few turkey placements can kill a fledgling search business.

"I was amazed how quickly she put together an organization and sold her services to major law firms successfully, including our law firm," Keller said. "Within a few years, she became the go-to person in this community."

Comeford said selling her business has been something of a "surreal" experience.

"But it's not lost on me that we wouldn't be here today but for our wonderful clients and candidates," she said. "They took a chance on me 18 years ago, believed in our vision, and I am immensely grateful to each and every one of them."

MPS Group, which had earnings of \$39.6 million on revenue of \$1.26 billion during the first nine months of 2006, has grown organically and through niche acquisitions.

The Professional Services Division of MPS Group, of which Special Counsel, Accounting Principals and Soliant Health are a part, has paid several million dollars, and up to \$49 million, for acquisitions in recent years in the accounting, legal and IT trades, according to 2006 filings with the Securities and Exchange Commission.

Neal St. Anthony • 612-673-7144 • [nstanthony@startribune.com](mailto:nstanthony@startribune.com)  
©2007 Star Tribune. All rights reserved.