

Global Guidance



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Paolo Berard explains how he's handling a spread-out legal team for Direct Energy

INTERVIEW BY ERIN BRERETON

As if juiced by the very electricity it supplies, Direct Energy, founded in 1986, has expanded into a \$10 billion business with approximately 6,000 employees since it merged with and became a subsidiary of global energy company Centrica, in 2000. Direct Energy is now one of North America's largest energy and energy-related service providers, bringing gas and power to 13 million residential homes and businesses in 46 US states, the District of Columbia, and Canada, and it's Paolo Berard who helps manage legal affairs across all the business's regions.

As the head of legal for Direct Energy's services division, Berard, who joined the company in March 2010 after 10 years in private practice in Toronto and New York City, oversees a team of 12 attorneys and other legal professionals. Here he speaks to *Advantage* about his company's growth, his interest in the energy industry, and his unusual workplace.

Advantage: What drew you to the energy industry?

Paolo Berard: It was one of those soul-searching events; I was looking to move in-house and had a pretty short list of industries at the top of my list. There was a lot of change and regulatory action going on in the oil, gas, and energy industries, so I thought that would be interesting. Once I met with the team at Direct Energy, I knew I had found the right place.

Has the job involved any new challenges or skills?

Absolutely. I am still very much in the early stages of the learning curve. But having had exposure to such a wide variety of industries as an M&A lawyer made the experience easier. You get a broad view of how industries operate.

How has this role differed from your past professional experiences?

In our office, everybody is sitting at a desk. There are no walls; we don't even have cubicles. It takes some getting used to, but it fosters an air of collegiality. It's a very social and interactive workplace.

Does that ever make it tough to get work done?

Sometimes I just want to close the door and block out the noise to plow through a 100-page contract. We encourage folks to work from home one day a week. I try and leave some of those quiet tasks for my day working remotely.

How would you describe your management style?

It's certainly very open and communicative. As a senior attorney in a firm, you're paired with junior attorneys and paralegals, but it's very different as a manager. We try to make sure people understand their career path. I really like to give people the freedom to do what they need to do. If they need me, I'm absolutely happy to jump in.

Are there any difficulties managing a staff in different regions?

Geographically, it's challenging, and I spend more time on airplanes than I'd like to. It's not easy when you have reports in four different cities and a boss in another country, but that's the nature of our business.

Have you faced any issues practicing law in different countries?

Certainly. As we think about driving additional efficiencies across a global business, one thing we're looking to do is bring various business units from the UK, Canada, and the US together and consider single-

source suppliers that deliver in all three jurisdictions. Although the regulatory regimes differ, you can get a terrific result—but there are differences you need to be sensitive to.

What's the biggest challenge you face in your current role?

I've come to learn how quickly this company changes and adapts to change externally in the marketplace. In the last 12–18 months, we relocated our corporate headquarters from Toronto to Houston; a big part of the corporate support team has migrated from around the corner from me to another country. And we're continually looking at and buying new businesses. I'm much better at managing that type of change now than three years ago. When we were going through a restructuring or acquisition, we'd get to the end and say, "Great!" Instead, I now say, "What's next?"

Career Milestones

1994
Graduates from Queen's University in Kingston, ON

1996
Works as a summer student for 400-attorney Canadian firm Osler, Hoskin & Harcourt LLP

1997
Graduates summa cum laude from the University of Ottawa law school

1997–1998
Articles with Canadian firm Osler, Hoskin & Harcourt

1999–2007
Works as an associate corporate lawyer at Osler, Hoskin & Harcourt, including at stint in the firm's New York office

2007–2010
Serves as a corporate and securities attorney for Toronto- and Vancouver-based Goodmans LLP

2010
Joins Direct Energy as the head of legal for the company's services division

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