Now obtain legal services at lower cost with the new kind of legal firms

That's where a new kind of firm is stepping in, epitomized by Axiom Global Inc. Big law firms provide lots of services but charge fantastically large bills, and those bills aren't going down anytime soon as firms focus on ever higher profits-per-partner numbers. But their clients don't seem to enjoy those high bills for some reason.

So increasingly clients are turning to a new model of legal services. This is where firms like Axiom provide highly trained lawyers on-site for much cheaper. Axiom is the largest firm of its kind, but there are other firms such as Outside GC, LLC, in Boston and Phillips & Reiter, PLLC, in Houston. These firms offer experienced and well-trained lawyers to companies as needed, usually at discounted rates.

In short, it's kind of like a temporary in-house counsel position, except using a Big Law attorney. These firms can keep down the costs since they don't have a bunch of partners who pull down millions each year in salary. In addition, the attorney works either from home or in the client's offices, thereby saving all those real estate costs the large law firms have to deal with.

The benefits for the clients are enormous. Smaller companies that don't have in-house departments can hire these attorneys as needed. Larger companies can grab one for that one project that really doesn't need to be sent to the very expensive outside counsel.

When he was working for a large firm, the founder of Axiom noticed that his entire salary had been billed by February — so, in effect, every hour he billed after that went to firm overhead and the partners' pockets. He realized that clients could save a lot of money if the waste associated with this system were eliminated.

Lawyers who work for Axiom were trained by the big law firms. They now work full-time for Axiom, taking temporary assignments with corporate clients. They get benefits but no pay in between assignments. This makes working for Axiom and companies like it ideal from a quality-of-life perspective as you can take time off in between assignments. Attorneys who work for Axiom still get paid about what they would make in the big law firms, minus the yearly bonus.

Working for Axiom lets attorneys try all sorts of things, such as working on that novel they always wanted to write or spending more time with the kids.

Of course, there are disadvantages: the lack of bonuses and the lack of prestige. If you work for Cravath, everyone knows it. Who's Axiom? But then, you don't have to bill 3,000 hours per year either.

And corporate clients seem happy. They get the same quality of service (due to the fact the attorneys were trained in Big Law environments) yet can save 25% to 50% of the cost.

Of course, the big law firm model isn't in any danger. Big firms will still get the truly complex cases, the high-profile work that commands top dollar. But Axiom and its cohorts are making inroads.

The biggest hurdle? Getting the highly trained attorneys to join in the first place. But considering how many associates are unhappy with life in the big firm environment, it's not a real problem — law firms will continue to make their employees unhappy for a good while to come.