

Introduction

2006

I can remember fellow members of the bar telling me in the early years of my career, “Chinn, when are you going to go out on your own?” I would reply, “I don’t think I could take that risk.” They would say, “Come on, you gotta jump into the deep end.” Well, I played it safe for years, practicing under other peoples’ direction for ten years. And then it became crystal clear to me that no matter how well I performed or how dutiful I might be to my employer, I was never going to get from other people what I wanted. I knew that I had no choice but to start my own practice. I was at the point where the prospect of failure or bankruptcy did not matter.

So, I began to plan. I knew I had to prepare, but more than that, I knew I had to move fast. I made a list of supplies and went to the local office supply store, where I spent \$115 on legal pads, pens, copy paper, paper clips, staplers, file folders, fasteners, and hole punches. I talked to a friend who had some extra space and arranged to sublease from him. In a stroke of luck, the previous occupant of the office space decided to retire and wanted me to look after her furniture. She had two old-fashioned red phones with two lines. I called the phone company for a phone number and decided to keep the two lines. Even though the need for two lines at that time was laughable at best, I figured the worst thing possible was for a potential client to be unable to get a hold of me because of a busy line. I picked a phone number that spelled “ATTY.” I thought that was catchy. I went to the post office and got a post office box.

Next I went to the bank and announced that I was starting a business. I asked the bank to advise me on what types of accounts and checks I needed. I opened two accounts, one for “operating” and one for trust. I got a large three-ring checkbook for each account. I thought that looked more businesslike than a simple checkbook.

In just a few short days, I had arranged for my office, my furniture, my mail, and my phones; I was ready to move. I opened my office on July 1, 1988. I will never forget getting up early that morning to make sure I was at the office by 8:00, even though I had no business. I put on my best three-piece suit, even though I had no appointments. I went by the post office box shortly after eight that morning, even though there could not have been any mail there. I got started and I never looked back. I made as much money in the next five months as I would have made in a year with my employer. People came out of the woodwork to help me by sending referrals. I was lucky in everything. Life has never been sweeter than the last seventeen years of practice on my own. Sure, being on your own brings challenges, but there is nothing like freedom!

As I struggled to run my practice, I became obsessed with reading and learning everything I could about personal and business management, especially law practice management. I sought coaching from several different sources and have continued with those coaches for years. Over the years I have spoken to lawyers all over the state of Mississippi on law practice management at the request of the Mississippi Bar. I have enjoyed making presentations for the ABA Section of Family Law throughout the United States and Canada. I served for five years as an adjunct professor of law at the Mississippi College School of Law, where I designed a course in law practice management. This book is the product of that experience and learning.

2018

Well, it's been eleven years since the book was first published. During that time, I built my firm into as many as five lawyers and seven support staff. I spent many hours in study and coaching and learning how to manage a large law firm. My goal was to create a law firm where I could narrow my efforts to only those things with which a lawyer with thirty-five years of experience had to be involved. By 2005, I had a great team of people and my responsibilities were narrowed to management, marketing, and directing the course of legal proceedings. I had great associates who were able to draft pleadings, attend hearings, and take cases from start to finish. I had a person with an accounting degree who focused on the financial aspects of divorce in a paralegal capacity. I also had a full-time marketing person who helped me develop my website and my Internet presence and helped with my search engine optimization and my local advertising.

Also in 2005, I began the journey of converting my practice from hourly billing to "value pricing" and alternative billing. These efforts began when I listened

to an American Bar Association (ABA) seminar in which they discussed alternative billing. They talked about the ABA Commission on Billable Hours Report which decried the negative effects of the billable hour on both attorneys and clients and which recommended that attorneys move toward fixed prices and other alternative billing arrangements that were not focused on time. They also talked about the author, Ron Baker, who wrote a book called *Value Pricing*. I read the ABA Commission on Billable Hours Report and purchased Ron Baker's book. I read Ron's book from cover to cover and then called him to discuss the issues in his book. To my surprise, Ron, who is from Napa Valley in California, was quite willing to talk to me and we became close friends. I began the process of research and study to convert to value pricing. As with most things I do, I jumped right in and took a shot at it and have not stopped since. I have not handled a billable hour case since 2005.

As a part of the regular coaching that I received, it was recommended that I train my firm in such a way that I could take thirty days off without being involved at all in the management of the firm. This was a daunting task, but I set out to achieve it, because I believed that if I could take thirty days off, it meant that my team was operating at maximum capacity. In 2006, 2007, and 2008, I took a full thirty days off each summer. You would never believe the anxiety that a lawyer experiences when he leaves his firm for thirty days. It took the third occasion before I fully relaxed and enjoyed the time away. It was also interesting how the thirty-day period empowered the rest of my team. It gave them confidence to know that they could function on such an extended basis without my presence or my input. By the summer of 2008, I felt like I had finally reached the pinnacle of achieving the goal of creating a large firm that could operate for me both now and in the future.

In August 2008, the great recession struck and it impacted my firm. In 2009, the BP oil spill took place in the Mississippi Gulf Coast, crippling the Mississippi economy, from the offshore oil rigs all the way north to Jackson. These two seminal economic events, among others, created a negative economy for a firm dedicated to being involved in high-asset litigation. Dealing with these issues was one of the true great learning experiences of my life. It was a great test.

Over time, I reduced the size of my firm to the point where it is now, with one contract associate and one paralegal. With my fixed pricing, it is not necessary for me to have a large number of lawyers in order to increase revenue through billable hours. In addition, I have learned how to use case management software and document merger software to take care of most of my business without

the use of any assistance. In addition, electronic filing has become prominent throughout; most of the counties in Mississippi and this makes the filing and review of pleadings much more efficient.

As everyone knows, there have been an awful lot of changes in the legal profession since 1988. It's almost amusing to read my 2006 introduction on what office supplies I purchased and what phone lines I obtained when I opened my practice in July 1988. Much of the information from the 2006 edition of this book in regards to marketing, management, and technology has changed drastically. Law practice management software, document merger software, email, texting, and the Internet have completely transformed practice in many ways. Most of these changes have been for the good, but I know most of the struggle with hundreds of emails each day and clients who want to text us at 10:30 on Saturday night and expect immediate replies.

In this revised edition, I devote a lot of attention to the technological advances in law practice. I also address the many changes that the Internet and social networking have brought to marketing. Finally, I spend more time discussing alternative billing, which is a growing trend all over America in all types of practices.