

## CHAPTER 1

# Making Money While Getting the Firm Started

### OUTLINE

**Contract Work**

**Document Review**

**Write Legal Articles**

**Work in a Nonlegal Job**

**Chapter Checklist: Get Supplemental Income**

**W**hen I talk to attorneys about starting their own practice, the biggest concern they have is about how they are going to make money while the firm gets started. This is completely valid, as we all have bills that need to get paid, lifestyles we want to maintain, and, often, families to support. And to do all of that, we need money, honey. But if that is the main thing holding you back from starting your own firm, don't let it. There are lots of things you can do as your firm grows to ensure you still have enough money coming in to support yourself. While it is stressful to go from life with a steady paycheck to life with no set income, that will not last forever. And honestly, if you follow all the steps in this book, you will likely end up earning way more than you did at a law firm and gain the flexibility and work-life balance you crave.

All that being said, if you're going to start a law firm when you're broke, you will still need to find a way to pay the bills as your firm gets started—it took me about six months to make enough money to cover my firm's expenses as well as my personal bills. Consider erring on the side of caution, however, and plan to wait a full year before earning a comfortable income. It may not take that long, but it's good to be prepared, especially if your goal is to open your firm without investing any personal funds. In the meantime, you will need another source of income that allows the flexibility to work on your own practice. Eventually you will be working for yourself 100 percent, if that's your goal, but in the beginning, you will need to compromise a bit in order to survive. What follows are a few ways to accomplish this.

## CONTRACT WORK

Doing contract work for other attorneys is a great way to make extra money. Many contract jobs allow you to work from home on your own time, so you can get the work done between appointments and casework for your own clients. The only downside is that often the amount of work fluctuates, so you may not always see a steady stream of income. To make your income flow more reliable, you can do contract work for a few different firms or attorneys. This will ensure you have work coming in from different places, just in case one runs out of work to give you or money to pay you. And when you start with a new attorney, find out how much work he or she reasonably expects to give you.

Another option is to find a contractor position for a large firm that always seems to have overflow work, and then tailor your position there based on your financial needs and your need for flexibility as you get your firm up and running. Then, as your firm grows, you can slowly taper off your contract work. A position like this is a great option as it provides more stability, predictability, and a steady paycheck.

When I first moved to Washington, DC, I began doing contract work for former friends and colleagues in San Diego. I emailed attorneys I knew from San Diego who had busy practices, told them I was starting my own practice, and offered to take contract work if they needed someone to draft briefs, prepare filing packages, and do any other remote attorney work. Multiple attorneys responded, happy to have my help. The setup worked out well because the San Diego attorneys did not see me as likely to poach their clients, since I lived so far away, and most of the legal arguments fell under the law of the Ninth Circuit, where I had practiced for years. Because I was familiar with the types of cases I handled on a contract basis, as well as Ninth Circuit law, I was able to research and draft legal briefs fairly quickly. The attorneys paid me on a flat-fee basis, so I did my work quickly and efficiently to make more money per hour and focus my extra time on building up my own firm.

Here are some tips for getting contract work:

1. If you left a position at a prior firm on good terms, talk to the managing attorney about helping the firm on a contract basis. If you know the firm has overflow work in a certain practice area or if you have in-depth knowledge about a particular project or case type, offer to help the firm manage these cases or projects. If they have not replaced you at the firm or trained up your replacement in these specific areas, they may be happy to have you help out as they get adjusted.

Explain that you are willing to work for them either hourly or on a flat-fee basis per project, and that you will work from home on your own time while adhering to the deadlines they set. If you must go to the office to work on these projects, and that still allows you time to meet with clients for your own firm, that is fine. But if you can and want to work remotely, you can definitely make this part of your terms. If your old firm is hesitant, offer to provide daily or weekly updates on the progress of your work, and remind them that by working remotely, you are saving

them money on providing an office space for you. Remember, you are your own boss now, so you can negotiate for the things you want.

For many firms, hiring a former employee as a contractor is an attractive option because they still receive the work of an attorney trained in-house who is familiar with their cases, but they no longer have to pay a full salary or benefits, provide office space, or pay for any “extras,” such as conferences, bar dues, staff lunches, and other perks. If the managing attorney is unsure about contracting work out to you, remind him or her of the money being saved on these benefits.

2. Join a social media group that attorneys in your practice area regularly use that might post opportunities for attorneys who specialize in your practice area. Social media connects you to people across the country and around the world, which greatly expands your pool of options when it comes to contract work. Even if you practice state law, you can still prepare work for attorneys in other states or even countries. Those attorneys will just need to review the work to ensure it complies with the laws and regulations in their jurisdiction and then submit it in their name.

Once you select your social media platform(s), get involved with the groups. Regularly check posts and contribute to the group yourself. Answer questions and provide feedback. This will help you get noticed and position you as a knowledgeable attorney in your field. Regularly search the group to look for opportunities to provide contract work. Try searching *referral*, *contract attorney*, *contract work*, and your geographical location or the name of the court where you handle cases. Eventually, someone might ask for a referral to a contract attorney, and you can offer your services.

I am part of several different groups on Facebook that are full of immigration attorneys. Many of the groups have a few thousand immigration attorneys from across the country, and some are designed for solo practitioners, many of whom need contractors to help with overflow work. With this many members, there are typically twenty to fifty posts per day in each group, and many come from attorneys who are looking for referrals in other states, or from firms seeking help on a contract basis. In fact, my very first client came out of one of these groups.

I also joined some more general groups, such as those for solo practitioners, local small businesses, female law firm owners, and mom attorneys.<sup>1</sup> Although these groups are not targeted at my practice area specifically, there is an overlap in the work we do, and occasionally people in these groups need an attorney specializing in immigration law. Once you join some groups relevant to your practice area, see if you can find some additional groups that might cater to your target client. Then, ruthlessly post, respond to questions, and search for opportunities for referrals or contract work.

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<sup>1</sup> Once I became a parent, a whole new world of networking opportunities that I'd never known about was opened up to me. If you are a parent, take advantage of this!

3. Talk to your contacts. Let your colleagues in the community know you are looking for contract work while your firm grows and that you would welcome referrals. Talk to contacts at large and small firms. Often larger firms get overwhelmed with work on a seasonal basis and look for extra help. In smaller practices, attorneys tend to need help on a contract basis before making the leap to hiring someone full-time. Make sure all your contacts know you are looking for contract work so you are the first person they think of when the need arises.

On that note, make sure you are actively networking (this book covers networking in more detail in later chapters). Get your face out there. Even if you tell your contacts you are available for contract work, they might not remember if they do not see or hear from you for a while. But if you are out in the community networking and talking to people, they will remember you are available and think of you when they need help.

There are some specific strategies I employed when networking specifically in the legal industry. First, I got involved in legal organizations, such as the ABA and the local bar association. I attended continuing legal education classes and got involved in subgroups of the organization relevant to my practice. Second, I went to happy hour events where I knew other attorneys would be present. Many of the legal organizations I joined hosted regular happy hours, and so did my law school's alumni association. After meeting attorneys at these events, I usually sent a follow-up email, and if I really wanted to create a business relationship with that person, I set up a coffee meeting to talk more. I then followed up regularly to maintain the relationship.

Putting feelers out and networking with local attorneys in my practice area is how I scored a stable contract at a large firm. About six months after I opened my practice, an attorney with the largest immigration firm in town approached me at a networking event and let me know her firm was seeking contract attorneys. I contacted her firm and was offered contract work within a week. That became one of my largest sources of income while my practice was still growing; even after my firm grew, I still occasionally did contract work for the firm during slow times. It's nice to have work to fall back on in a pinch, and a large firm tends to have a consistent need for help.

Right now is the best time to reach out to other attorneys, to network, and to show your face around town. You are just starting your firm and are not overloaded with work, so you have the time to invest in this. And this face-to-face interaction may be your best shot at getting a great contract job and a decent income while you build your business.

All of the options previously outlined are excellent ways to find contract work to provide some financial stability as your firm grows. Try them all. By exploring different avenues to find work, you will find more opportunities, and you will diversify your income stream, which means if someone stops giving you work, you still have work coming in somewhere else. Start putting feelers out, and you may get some work lined up quickly.

## DOCUMENT REVIEW

Similar to contract work, but more general in nature, is document review. This is the process whereby each party to a case sorts through and analyzes the documents and data they possess (and later the documents and data supplied by their opponents through discovery) to determine which are sensitive or otherwise relevant to the case. In a document review position, the attorney typically reviews documents or emails, often from discovery, and organizes and creates abstracts of those documents so that the lead attorneys on the case may analyze each quickly.

Thanks to the advent of e-discovery, most of these documents are digital, so you will probably be able to work remotely. However, some companies working with highly sensitive information require their document reviewers to come into the office. If you need the flexibility of remote work, look for document review positions that fit this criterion.

Depending on your personality, you may really enjoy reviewing information and organizing documents, or you may find the work a bit dry. Regardless, document review provides a steady paycheck, and the positions are fairly easy to find, which is what you are looking for right now. A quick online search for “document review jobs in Nashville, TN” on December 18, 2019, on Indeed reveals 43 available positions. And switching up the search to “document review jobs in Michigan” yields 85 postings. Document review is available around the country, and the jobs are plentiful.

The downside to document review is that it is not the most interesting work. However, it will pay the bills and allow you the flexibility to keep growing your own law firm, which is your main goal. Plus, working in a boring side job will further motivate you to work hard on your own firm so you can earn enough to completely support yourself. Remember, your end-goal here is to start your own, thriving practice, and taking a boring job in the meantime is just one step closer to getting you there.

## WRITE LEGAL ARTICLES

An easy way to make money on your own time is by writing legal articles on a freelance basis. If you are planning to start your own law firm, then you have enough knowledge to be able to write about certain areas of the law. In areas where you have basic knowledge but are a little fuzzy on the details, a small amount of legal research can get you up to speed and give you enough information to write a straightforward article.

Here are a few ways you can get paid to write legal articles:

1. An easy place to find work writing legal articles is Nolo ([www.nolo.com](http://www.nolo.com)). Nolo provides do-it-yourself products to consumers (such as software to fill out your own forms), access to attorneys, and articles that explain different areas and sub-areas of the law. These articles are intended to be short and easy for the layman to read. Which means you do not have to invest a ton of time into writing a lengthy article filled with legalese and carefully chosen arguments. Simply explain the concepts and requirements in layman’s terms.

When first starting my practice, I wrote multiple articles for Nolo about many different subareas of immigration law, and I got paid about \$60 to \$75 per article. I was usually able to draft a well-written article in about two to three hours, so I ended up earning about \$20 to \$35 per hour. That's not bad, considering I was able to make that money while sitting on my couch in my pajamas and writing about a topic very familiar to me. Writing legal articles also allowed me the flexibility to work on my own firm, while squeezing in time to write in between projects.

Nolo is a great option for consistent, straightforward legal writing. It keeps your mind sharp and lets you work on topics you are familiar with and enjoy, while still providing the supplemental income you need as you start your business. Plus, you can't beat that flexibility.

2. Another option for legal articles, and freelance legal work in general, is Upwork.com. Upwork is another freelance legal writing company, but it is structured differently than Nolo. Rather than writing educational articles for publishing, Upwork allows users to post requests for legal work.

To find a job in Upwork, go to [www.upwork.com](http://www.upwork.com) and click on "Find Jobs." Then browse the different categories. Under "Legal" there are several different subcategories, divided up by practice area. If you specialize in one of the practice areas, great! Just click on it and start browsing the jobs. For example, here is a posting listed under the "Contract Law Jobs" subcategory: "Attorney needed to review our current Independent Contractor Agreement and provide feedback, comments, suggestions, etc." The requestor is offering \$100 for this service. In another posting, listed under "Criminal Law Jobs," the poster is offering \$1,200 to "Test three writers for a month, in seeing who can write excellent Web content on criminal law topics that are outlined for the writer, with primary keyword phrases, and multiple related keyword phrases (to be included) that pertain to the specific pages being created . . . I expect to receive 60 'pages' of content, averaging 400 to 600 words for the \$1,200."

If you have other skills, you can look for jobs in nonlegal fields, such as writing, translation, customer service, or one of the many other categories on Upwork. But if you want to focus on legal writing, there are plenty of jobs to be had. Upwork.com is more like Craigslist for writing, but it is a great way to make extra cash as you start your practice.

## WORK IN A NONLEGAL JOB

*What?! Work in a nonlegal job??? But I just shelled out over \$100,000 for my education! Plus interest! I have student loans! My family will think I'm a failure! Locusts!*

Calm down, calm down, you're going to be fine. You're starting your own practice, remember? Who's going to look at your résumé and ask why you worked at the Gap for three months while you were starting your firm? In fact, why are you even putting that on your résumé? During those three months, you were the enterprising new owner of a law firm!

Look, I'm a lawyer, too, and I understand that lawyers typically want to work in the legal field. We often think nonlegal, or at least nonprofessional, jobs are beneath us. It is pretentious and egotistical of us, but many attorneys feel that way. But when starting your practice, you will need to come down from your pedestal and do the best thing for you and your firm. I'm not saying you need to tell your clients or colleagues you bartend every night, but you need to look at this as part of the cost of starting your business. I listed a bunch of legal jobs as options for earning extra cash, but if those don't pan out and you truly want to start your own firm, you need to be prepared to hustle a bit in the beginning.

Even if you work a side job as you get started, keep your legal skills fresh. If you choose to work in a nonlegal job and have the time, consider volunteering at a nonprofit or other organization in your legal capacity once or twice a week. This will keep your mind sharp and can serve as another good way to build your network as your practice grows. And it gives you something nice to tell prying relatives when they ask what you do with your free time.

Now that you've considered a few different ways to make money while growing your practice, you should be ready to take the leap. Many of the things you do to support yourself as your firm grows will give you the much-needed flexibility to meet with clients, work on setting up your firm, and marketing your new law practice. Not having a steady paycheck is often the main reason people hold back from starting their own practice. Speaking from experience, now that I know there are so many ways to make money while growing a law firm, I wish I had done it sooner.

## **CHAPTER CHECKLIST: GET SUPPLEMENTAL INCOME**

- Reach out to colleagues to let them know you are accepting contract work.** Send emails to colleagues. Post on social media where appropriate. Tell people when networking.
- Join Facebook groups relevant to your practice are.** Monitor and contribute to the groups daily. Do regular (once per day or more) searches for “referral” and “attorney.”
- Search for document review positions.** Search on Indeed or another job search platform for document review jobs. Apply to any that make sense for you.
- Reach out to Nolo about writing legal articles.** Find out what their application process is and apply.
- Register on Upwork and search for freelance jobs.** Search in different categories to see if there are any jobs relevant to your skill set. Apply for any relevant jobs. Set up an account on Upwork so people can find you for jobs.
- Search for and apply to nonlegal jobs.** Look on Craigslist, Indeed, or another job search platform for jobs you can do, that would pay you enough to survive, that you could tolerate, and that would still allow you to grow your firm. Apply to any jobs that meet these criteria.