

New Solos Must Plan for Success

By Barry D. Malone

Do you want to be your own boss? Some attorneys yearn for this freedom their entire careers. Some spend years saving money to hang out their own shingles and leave established positions in law firms to embrace their destinies. Others have had a solo practice or small firm partnership thrust upon them due to the poor economy.

Whatever your reason for going solo, you have a lot of planning to do. Below is a brief guide to help you get started.

Take advantage of the Internet

Capital is likely to be scarce in the beginning, so use Web resources as much as possible to plan your business and stay abreast of important news affecting your practice. The American Bar Association Law Practice Management Section's Web site www.abanet.org/lpm provides valuable information for solos on topics such as forming a business to case management and getting paid. Many state bar associations have valuable online resources too. For example, the Ohio State Bar Association's OfficeKeeper is a downloadable guide with detailed sections on business planning, technology, and budgeting.

Get professional financial advice

Before going solo, you probably had little experience with the financial side of lawyering aside from billing hours. A successful solo practitioner must be able to wear the hats of CEO, COO, and CFO all at once. Barron K. Henley of Henley, March & Unger Consulting, Inc. advises that the first investment all new solos should make is to hire "a CPA to come in and work with them." Henley argues that an accounting professional's advice is a must for a new solo.

Network through bar associations

Local, state, and national bar associations provide a wide variety of professional resources, as well as camaraderie with fellow lawyers that can be lacking in a solo's daily practice. Heidi Wagner Dorn, of Latimer Dorn PLLC, states that the best advice she received when forming her two-person partnership was to "network, network, network!" She has found that "[l]ocal bar associations have wonderful resources and opportunities for networking."

"Through my local bar association, I have a lifeline to experts in every legal field," said Cary B. Hall, of the Law Offices of Cary B. Hall, L.L.C. According to Hall, bar associations are great sources for clients, both from referral services and other attorneys. Robert Beaupre of Robert Beaupre, Esq., PLLC says his participation in bar associations "has directly led to court appointments."

Streamline administrative tasks

Solos spend a significant amount of time on administrative tasks, such as calendaring, correspondence, and filing—sometimes a big change for a new solo. Jennifer Latimer of the two-person partnership Latimer Dorn, PLLC had come to rely on "assistants who usually knew the procedural side of things better than I did" and "billing departments, mailing departments, [and] filing clerks" in past jobs at larger law firms. In retrospect, Latimer recognizes that "[t]here were a lot of 'behind the scenes' things that made the firms work that I took for granted."

To ease the time burden of administrative tasks, Kiana Franuli'c, of the Law Office of Kiana Franuli'c, recommends that solos create forms and procedures to increase efficiency: "There are so many things that you do that are repetitive, so I try to make forms to make the tasks easier." She recommends creating forms for letters, litigation files, and discovery.

Stay focused on your goals

The immediate planning required to start a law practice can be overwhelming. Keeping the end goals in mind can keep you motivated and on the right path. Alexis Neely of www.LawBusinessRevolution.com stresses planning for the future and advises that a solo must create a vision for the future and determine what must happen today to achieve that vision.

Reach out to peers for advice

New solos blaze new ground every day and are sure to have many questions along the way. With no managing partner or colleague down the hall to confer with, solos must consult with their peers for advice. "As a solo, you're not the first and you won't be the last," advises Hall. "Talk to those that have walked the path before you. They will usually help you without even having to ask. But ask anyway."

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