

SELF-EMPLOYED

PRACTICE POINTERS

So, You Want to Go Solo?

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At one point or another, you've probably considered starting your own law practice. With the freedom to set your own hours, be your own boss, and see your name on the plaque by the door, the decision can seem like a no-brainer: you were born to do this!

Now, it's not that I don't believe in you, but before you order your new business cards and walk out on your current boss, there are some things you need to consider. There are reasons not everyone who goes into law ends up with their own firm. This series will help highlight some of the many aspects of running your own law firm – especially the details – so you can limit the number of times you ask yourself “Why didn't I think of this sooner?!”

Here's what to know before you fly solo ...

Space: The Final Frontier, but Your First Consideration

First off, where will you practice? Wherever you practice, you'll want your office to be professional, welcoming, and accessible to clients. Consider proximity to the courthouse, available signage, and whether your target audience will be able to see your sign and locate your office.

Size will depend on how many people are in your firm. Somebody needs to answer the phone, and you'll be busy with a lot of other tasks. Consider hiring a college student to serve as your receptionist—or explore online reception services.

If you're the only one in your practice, you can go anywhere and deal with any complications that might arise. However, if you plan to hire others, you must consider their needs, too. Having multiple people talking on phones, reviewing video evidence, and trying to meet with clients while sharing an office can make your office feel stressful, chaotic, and disorganized. As you search for a space, look for one that will not only suit you now, but could also offer opportunities for expansion later. Many contracts lock their signees into an agreement that will last for years. Before you finalize any office space, ask yourself if you can see your goals – at least for the next couple years – taking place in this space.

Behold, Your Stuff!

What else are you going to put in your office space? Desks, chairs, filing cabinets, computers, and a phone are some clear necessities. And no matter how much you may work online (oh, hey, remember to figure in the cost of utilities—including internet), you will probably still have

days when you will want a printer. If you prefer to work with paper documents, you will need a heavy-duty printer and a lot of paper. You will be dealing with a lot of confidential documents, so you'll probably also want a shredder. Too many gadgets will claim to make your life easier, but only you can determine which items will best suit your practice culture. Label maker? Convenient for printing file labels, address stickers, and postage, but you may prefer to use your regular printer to print directly on envelopes.

Price things out. Do you know how much a ream of paper costs? What about regular office supplies like pens, highlighters, sticky notes, organizers, folders, envelopes, holepunches, and a stapler? How much do they cost all together? As an uninitiated soul, I was *appalled* at how much we paid for our internet office phone, but that up-front cost does mean we don't have to pay recurring phone bills. If you've always relied on someone else to keep the office stocked, you could encounter some sticker shock if you've never given a second thought to the cost of supplies. Exposure therapy will help you establish realistic expectations for supply spending.

But Wait ... There's More!

Make sure you also get the digital tools you'll need to succeed. You'll need an email address, word processing software, and a calendar. There is a plethora of practice management software available, which can help you keep track of your clients' contact and case information, as well as scheduling and time spent on each case. Consider the legal research you'll be doing, and how you will keep your books. Depending on your practice area, you may also need to pay a subscription to an online court filing service.

There's a lot to get excited about when starting your own practice. Don't let your eagerness interfere with your ability to consider all the angles and determine what will best suit your personal approach. Next time, we'll move on from your physical setup and preparedness to conceptual preparedness. These principles will aid you as you try to determine your firm's personal style and workplace culture.

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