Transitioning from Solo Practice to a Law Firm

Coming from law school, the first question most attorneys ask is how to find a good job. All law schools have alumni associations and job placement programs; it is an excellent idea to take advantage of both of these, especially if you intend to work for a government agency or the district attorney’s office once you’ve passed the local bar exam for the state in which you intend to practice.

However, many attorneys who do not go into public service start out in private practice, often as solo attorneys. Solo practice has its benefits — you set your own hours, and you have the flexibility to work in the subspecialty and practice that you enjoy the most. Being a solo attorney also means that all the minutiae of running a business also fall on your head — you need to advertise, handle the client meetings, do the taxes, take care of the filing, and everything else.

Often, attorneys opt to accept a pay cut in exchange for more free time and join a law firm. Law firms maintain staffs of assistants who handle the routine office chores, allowing the attorneys to focus on solving legal problems for their clients. Law firms also do group advertising — there’s an advertising budget, which may include ads in the yellow pages (or on the backs of phone books) or even search engine optimized advertising, or television ads, or finding participants for class-action lawsuits.

Once you’ve joined a law firm, there are plenty of opportunities for advancement — indeed, working your way up the hierarchy lets you command a higher hourly fee, and most law firms provide incentives for taking on larger case loads and winning cases by awarding bonuses, either quarterly or annually. Still, the ability to select what cases you want to work on is limited in comparison with solo practice. However, the pay after bonuses increases after the first year or two—and particularly hard-working attorneys, below the partner level, can make respectable salaries in the realm of $50,000 or more, and often more than double this salary after bonuses are included.

Getting into a law firm can be a challenge, if you didn’t get recruited for a position immediately out of law school or after joining a bar association. Most law firms don’t, for instance, place want ads in the local newspaper or on Craigslist. While online job boards such as monster.com and jobhunt.com periodically have attorney listings, this is not common practice for the industry. Specialized professional job listing sites, such as lawcrossing.com, are starting to fill that niche, but for now, the primary method of landing a position at a law firm is the old-fashioned way — connections, networking, and personal referrals.

So, in addition to putting a profile and curriculum vitae together, and gathering samples of your legal briefs and posting them on lawcrossing.com, be sure to renew your contacts with your law school’s alumni association—the vast majority of law firm positions and appointments come from recommendations from inside the company, and those recommendations come from your professional peers.

Local, county, and regional bar association meetings also exist. While pricey to join, they’re often the first places where you’ll get a hint about a new position opening at a law firm. Maintaining your membership in the state bar association is an important networking facet of your career, and should be treated as a professional safety net.

If all that fails, look critically at what specialties are needed in your area for attorneys, and take some continuing education classes to better mold your skills to match the needs of prospective employers. It applies to computer programmers; it applies to attorneys — every skill you have needs updating roughly every 18 months. Taking an extra class or two now can improve your prospects in a job market down the road, as well as give you more contacts and a better run at getting alumni association support.

Once you’ve made the transition to a firm, understand that your flexibility and freedom have been curtailed — while
there are paralegals and research staff available for your use, and people to take your phone calls while you’re out, your ability to choose cases, pick topics of interest, and more is considerably reduced. This, combined with having to work more standard (or far longer) office hours, can be a shocking transition to a solo practice attorney — don’t let the shock of the transition sour you on the experience. Stick to it for a month or two while you’re getting your feet on the ground. Focus on the work, and keep both your clients’ and the firm’s interests in balance as you progress. (Having gone through law school, and passed the bar, any would-be attorneys with tendencies towards laziness should have been weeded out early on.)

Most law firms put a premium on willingness to put in long hours, and on reliability. If you rent your home, it’s worth it to rent a place closer to work; you’re going to be spending more than 9 hours at the office every day, especially when doing a big case in your specialty. Cutting down on the commute time is critical for maintaining work-life balance. (Yes, it is possible for attorneys to have a work-life balance, but it takes proactive measures to make it happen.) Regardless of how you do it, the transition from solo practice to working at a law firm can be quite lucrative, both financially and professionally, and regarding contacts and reputation.

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