Planning to Have a Solo Practice after Law School: How Realistic Is It?

Hanging your shingle after the graduation and attempting to go solo may be either a first or a last option, depending on the law graduate. For example, whether a graduate makes the decision to go solo will often depend on his/her personality, skill set, network, and interests. If you are going solo after graduation because it is your first choice, then we suggest gaining a bit of experience under a mentor or in a law firm. This experience always helps to establish a proper solo practice. However, if you are thinking of going solo because of lack of acceptable alternatives, then there are things to be careful about, and we will be discussing these areas of concern in this article. Regardless of the situation, going solo after graduation has always been an option. It is not unrealistic, but there are things you need to keep in mind to make it work.

Why people think it is unrealistic to go straight for solo practice right after graduation

People do think that it is unrealistic for the average law student to strike out solo because a solo practice usually needs the person to have the following:

- Business acumen – knowing and being able to run a complete business unit (marketing and pricing of services and all other paraphernalia)
- Affable personality – both clients and people who refer cases like affable personalities in the first instance
- Risk-taking personality – business involves risks, but law students have a reputation of being generally risk-averse
- Networking ability – for a solo practitioner work usually comes from social referrals and from referrals from other lawyers. A person who has poor networking skills, usually, has little chance of success in solo practice
- Physical constitution – now you don't need to have the constitution of a NFL player, but having one helps. A solo practitioner has to carry around things more and run around more than an attorney in a law firm. The solo practitioner does not have the luxury to delegate work, thus, practicing as a solo attorney requires a healthier physical constitution to cope with work stress.
- Tech savvy – Today’s clients come with notebooks, laptops, and electronic record and communications devices in all shapes and forms. Being unfamiliar with your client’s software is acceptable, but if you cannot pick up the intricacies within the hour – you are suspect of being incompetent
- Money for investment – while you can get away with minimums, there are still investments that require to be made, whether it is the salary of a supporting paralegal secretary, or whether it is the hiring or purchase of hardware or software – there are initial expenses that can be adjusted, but cannot be done away with.

The problem is that the popular perception is hardly wrong, and the average law student or bookworm may find it difficult to fill the shoes of a successful solo practitioner. Still it is not unrealistic – in a market where survival is success, if you are smart enough to manage to survive as a solo practitioner, success will follow.
What to be careful about when going solo after graduation

- Be careful about spending and try to do with skeletal support and amenities, you are not going to attract your first clients by your big office, but you’ll get clients from referrals. Your first clients would be either coming to you to help you out with inconsequential cases where you can’t go wrong or because they want it cheap. Trying to show off money and glamour from the beginning of your career does not work unless you’ve got a senior lawyer in the family backing you up. Many people throw away their lives’ savings trying to go solo and then failing.
- Spending money on brainless advertising does not work – real networking does, and stressing the fact that you are not a competitor, but support.
- Attend the bar regularly – solo practice works well in regional levels, but it does not work well with remote networking.
- Be very careful about malpractice and know your limits and rules of professional conduct.
- Try to be very disciplined, proper, knowledgeable and courteous even in the most insignificant matters. Remember, you are being watched, because everyone needs good help. When you do things properly and manage to gain praise people learn of it and referrals start coming almost out of nowhere.
- Develop a practice area like domestic matters, insurance matters, real estate etcetera with time rather than remaining fully generalized and spread all around.
- Keep your expectations reasonable.
- Choose clients carefully and don’t be afraid to say no. Keep in mind that there are some very smart people out there who are ready to take a young lawyer for a ride.
- Do not get into cases where you get a percentage if you happen to win unless you got your finances covered fully including your living expenses and expenses of the matter.
- Do not lie, and remain frank and candid with your clients. Do not give false expectations, but tell your clients that you are new, but you would give your best, and if required would need to consult experienced lawyers. Additionally, if the case turns out to be beyond your capacity, you’d rather turn it over to more experienced professionals than hurt its merits. Moreover, what is truly important is that even if other lawyers ultimately handle the case, you will remain the knowledgeable watchman for the client to assure that there is transparency in the progress of the matter.

The fact is that going solo is now easier than ever before due to changes in the dynamics of economy and technological advancements. You can now use virtual offices, virtual assistants, and cut down your running costs, while you spend your time working with senior lawyers, at the court, and at the bar association networking events. It is always better to gather a bit of experience and build a small network before you strike out solo, but remember, hanging a shingle is always an option.