

Would a Virtual Law Office Work for You?

BY DEBRA L. BRUCE

Many lawyers may be wondering if a virtual law office would be right for their practices. There are numerous reasons why an attorney might be considering a virtual law office. Here are a few examples:

- Newly licensed attorneys may want to avoid the overhead and long-term commitment of a brick-and-mortar office;
- Experienced lawyers may want to expand the geographic reach of their existing practice to attract more clients;
- Many lawyers have a thriving practice in a smaller town, but may have difficulty finding locally the high-caliber legal talent they need to help handle the workflow;
- Family obligations or other circumstances make it difficult for some attorneys to keep traditional office hours;
- For some attorneys, the international scope of their work demands technological innovation to serve client needs;
- Some attorneys just long to escape the snow in the winter or the heat in the summer without interrupting their law practice; or
- Some attorneys may be members of a bar in one state, yet circumstances bring them to another, and they wish to keep their practices ongoing where they are bar members.

To help answer some of the questions about what it's really like to open a virtual law practice, I interviewed **Rania Combs**. Combs is a wills, trusts, and estates lawyer who has been licensed in Texas since 1994. When her spouse was transferred to North Carolina, she examined her options for practicing law there. Opening a virtual law office serving Texans while residing in North Carolina seemed like the solution to challenging circumstances. She launched her virtual practice in January 2010. You can view Combs' website at texaswillsandtrustslaw.com.

DB: What are some of the biggest misconceptions lawyers and clients seem to have about a virtual law office?

RC: The biggest misconception lawyers and clients have is that the attorney-client relationship will be impersonal because there is no face-to-face contact between the attorney and client. I have not found this to be the case. In fact, my clients usually comment on how personal the relationship feels. Although my firm is completely web-based, my clients and I are in constant communication via discussions on their client account and on the phone. The flat fee I quote my clients includes all communications between us so they never hesitate contacting me with a quick question or concern, which helps keep the lines of communication open. Also, my clients get an alert every time their file is updated, so they are kept apprised of my progress on their case.

DB: How does a typical new client relationship begin?

RC: Occasionally, a new client will call or email me first, but typically, he or she will initiate the relationship by registering as a new client on my virtual law office and starting a new case. The first thing I do when they register is call them to introduce myself and to answer any questions they may have about the process. I then attach a detailed questionnaire to their file for them to complete before we talk again.

DB: How much time do you spend talking on the phone with your clients?

RC: The time I spend on the phone varies greatly depending on my clients' unique circumstances. Some clients' needs are straightforward and they have few questions, while other clients' estates are more complex and they have many questions. I always have at least three conversations with them: an intro-

ductory phone call after they register, a phone call to discuss their goals and objectives and how to accomplish what they want to do, and a call after drafts have been prepared to answer any questions they may have and to ensure that the documents I have prepared reflect their wishes.

DB: How are your clients responding to working with you virtually?

RC: They really seem to enjoy working with me online. Many of my clients are very busy with family and work commitments and appreciate being able to communicate with me online or on their schedule, rather than only during normal business hours.

DB: Do your clients tend to have certain demographics in common, such as age, socio-economic class, etc.?

RC: Surprisingly, no. When I first launched the virtual law office a year ago, I expected that the vast majority of my clients would be people in the 25-45 age group with simple estate planning needs. But that hasn't been the case. About half my clients are over the age of 45. One client was in his 80s! Some of them do have small estates, but others have significant assets and other complexities involving blended families or special needs children.

DB: What patterns do you see in the way clients find you?

RC: Last year, most of my clients found my website when researching issues related to Texas wills, trusts, and estates. As my client base has grown, I've started getting some referred and repeat clients, which has been very rewarding.

DB: Do you think a virtual office is particularly suited to an estate planning practice? From your experience, what other practice areas do you think would work well?

RC: I think web-based law offices are well suited for practices that are transactional in nature, such as estate planning, although brick-and-mortar firms in any practice area could integrate a virtual component to communicate and exchange documents with their clients in a secure environment.

DB: What would you do differently in the start-up process (or otherwise) knowing what you know now?

RC: Quite honestly, I don't think I'd change a thing. Before I launched my firm, I spoke to as many attorneys, marketing professionals, and consultants as were willing to talk to me about what it would take to build a web-based law practice. I still do, because there is always something I can be doing better and I learn something from everyone I talk to. I especially appreciate those who are bluntly honest and back that honesty with practical advice that actually makes a huge difference. I also spend a lot of time talking with my clients about the factors that led them to my firm, what they liked most about the process, and things that surprised them. Each time I do that, I get more information about things I can do to improve my client's experience. Much of starting a business is trial and error, and I've learned things even through my mistakes. I wouldn't change that.

DB: What advice do you have for lawyers who are thinking about introducing a virtual element into their practice?

RC: You're going to have to find a way to drive clients to your

website. Just like building a traditional brick-and-mortar firm, building a web-based law firm takes time, patience, and hard work. It won't happen overnight.

DB: What challenges do you face with a virtual office, and how have you overcome them?

RC: People who are comfortable working with an attorney online are typically those who will use the Internet to research their problem or find an attorney. So I haven't had much return on investment on traditional forms of advertising, such as magazine ads. What has worked for me is promoting my firm and blog through social media, writing articles for my blog about issues potential clients are researching, and accepting invitations to write for other websites.

I extend my appreciation to Rania Combs for "paying forward" the help she received, by sharing her experience with our readers.



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This article originally appeared as a January 2011 post on the Solo Practice University (SPU) blog (<http://solopracticeuniversity.com/blog>). SPU is a web-based educational and professional networking community for sole practitioners and law students.



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United States EEOC Commissioner
CHAI FELDBLUM

Friday, June 24, 2011
Grand Hyatt, San Antonio

Chai Feldblum is the first out lesbian to serve as a Commissioner of the EEOC. She played a leading role in drafting the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 while serving as Legislative Counsel to the AIDS Project of the American Civil Liberties Union, and was equally instrumental in helping with the passage of the ADA Amendments Act of 2008. Feldblum is a leading scholar in the efforts to achieve equality for lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender people.

Commissioner Feldblum will be part of a day-long CLE program that will include one hour of ethics, membership meeting and an evening reception.

We will co-sponsor the Diversity Forum on Thursday, June 23

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