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— CHANGE . . . RESULTS . . . SUCCESS —

GETTING YOUR PRACTICE STARTED

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I have to say, 2026 has been an exciting year from my perspective. I don't remember a time when so many people have set out to set up their own firm.

I am seeing an uptick in experienced attorneys leaving different firms to join forces. Most are establishing boutique firms. Starting small. Maybe two to five attorneys. They are increasingly spending time getting the culture right. That's encouraging.

These attorneys are leaving firms because they've come to a decision about the "soft" things that can define the difference between walking into the office with a smile each day or feeling a weight building on your shoulders as you walk in. Many attorneys are leaving for their own solo practice for the same reasons.

I hear comments like:

- I think all my firm cares about is production. Reaching my goal for [billable hours/originating clients] is soul crushing. I am realizing that the sacrifice of my family life is not worth it.
- I don't feel connected where I am. I get good matters to handle. I get good guidance with skill development. But I have no idea whether I have any chance of making partner someday. And I'm not at all sure I would want to become one if offered, because I don't know what it means to be a partner here. I have no say in how things are run, and probably never will. A lot of what happens doesn't make sense to me.
- I was very clear when I [joined the firm/was elevated to partner] that family was a big priority, and that I was willing to trade a reasonable difference in compensation for reduced production goals. But I feel like many of the other partners look down on me as "not serious" about being a

lawyer, because I work less. The disparity in my production and my compensation continues to widen. I feel stressed and anxious. I made a bad “deal” and need to fix it.

- I don’t like the way our firm treats [partners/staff/clients]. I don’t like the atmosphere. It seems like there’s [little respect/little trust] between partners. It’s every-man-for-himself here.

You get the idea. The reason this segment has always focused on culture and expectations is because of the perceived negatives that these attorneys experience first-hand and choose to leave behind. There is a lot more intentionality in their process of getting started than I’ve witnessed before.

I certainly approve of this more emotionally intelligent approach. Those who just “wing it” where culture is concerned, especially if they are teaming up with someone exiting a different firm, may wind up with an out-of-the-frying-pan and into-the-fire experience.

In addition to those making a purposeful change, I am encouraged with the number of newly minted attorneys who have set up a solo practice or two to three attorney firm, as soon as they can, upon admission to the bar.

We’re talking mostly about people who haven’t developed unrealistic lifestyles. They are willing to take a risk, knowing that their income requirements are modest. I am even seeing an increase among those who borrowed to get through school. While some head to big firms to pay off their loans faster, others do so through a stint in public service. Despite the increasing cost of obtaining a J.D., and possible loan repayment needs, I see an increase in newly minted attorneys opening their own firm.

The amount of support I provide to newly minted attorney start-ups is greater. There is just so much these attorneys do not yet have awareness about. Let me share just a few examples.

I’ve already mentioned the importance of firm culture: trust, respect and expectations; how one treats clients and who are the firm’s ideal clients.

Just as important is the firm brand. What do you want to come to mind when people think about your firm? Developing that brand should be at the top of the list of considerations. Probably one of the first things after you figure out whether you can afford to take the leap into your practice.

A common mistake I see is attorneys who decide to create their business structure (PC, LLC, LLP, etc.) first. Frequently, by the time they contact me, they have gotten all the paperwork done. Registration completed. Often attorneys use

their own name(s) with the entity designation added. Sometimes it's a trade name, if they intend on a sharp practice focus.

Micro-niche practices are frequently more profitable. Being able to focus client development within a micro-niche makes marketing easier and more effective.

Then they tell me their email is johndoe@gmail.com and their partner is suesmith@gmail.com. What? What is your entity name? "Doe & Smith Family Law, LLP".

Nowadays everyone needs an internet presence. Having at least a simple website that communicates who you are, what you do and why you may be the right/best choice for a prospective client is a minimum requirement, in my opinion.

I explain how a Gmail address is far less professional than a branded email. I say that nothing in the email address suggests Doe and Smith have a relationship. I explain how cheap one can get exchange-level email support with one's own domain; much more secure than Gmail, too. I ask whether they think John@DoeSmithFamilyLaw.com sounds better and more professional? And how anyone who works for the firm will use the same convention: their first name and the firm's domain name. Then they really get the point.

I ask them if they checked to see if the domain DoeSmithFamilyLaw.com or DoeSmithLaw.com or anything similar is available. The answer is usually no. There is often an assumption it will be, if thought were given at all. In reality? Any name can be unavailable.

Sometimes the entity name has to be changed so that it is sufficiently close to any of the available domain names. For example, domain names can't have "&" so one must include "and" instead. Don't like that? Maybe just leave out the "&" altogether. That's an increasing trend. Oops, paperwork already filed needs to be amended.

It is so much simpler to put checking available domain names at the top of the list. You may have to be creative by adding something. For example, just the other day I helped an attorney through this. We wound up with DoeMediation_PA.com instead of DoeMediation.com.

Picking the right practice management software and technology provider, is also one of the areas that should go to the top of the planning list. Here, I find the newly minted attorneys are more tech-savvy and spend decent time making a decision. They are more likely to know what types of features they want. They compare several packages before deciding, whereas more experienced attorneys may

just get what they were used to using at their old firm, or get whatever a colleague recommends, with far less due diligence. Often, they don't even realize the improvements and efficiencies that might have been obtainable.

PBA members who are thinking of starting their own firm, are already in the process or have done so recently but want to make sure nothing is missed are welcome to call for assistance, checklists, guidance and resources.

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