

Create Your Path by Walking

By Tim Batdorf

I had arrived.

Five years after graduating from law school, I was practicing the exact type of law I always wanted and working for the ideal law firm. I was a hot commodity after receiving my LLM in Taxation and was able to choose my employer, an experience vastly different than when I could not find a job after graduating from law school. When I accepted The Firm's offer, I knew it was my best and last hope for happiness at a law firm. If I wasn't happy at The Firm, I thought, I would not find happiness at any firm. I interviewed with too many potential employers to believe there'd be anything better than what I had.

And I was right. The Firm was everything I expected and more. My supervising attorney was one of the best tax attorneys in the city, and (fortunately for me) he was a great teacher who loved to mentor associates. My hourly requirements were reasonable. I was paid well. I was working on really amazing matters for major-league clients.

But, after working for only a few short months, a familiar feeling crept over me—unhappiness. Before law school, I always dreamt of starting my own practice. After law school, I convinced myself I had to work at a firm. After working at The Firm, I realized I was truly an entrepreneur at heart.

When I decided to leave The Firm,

I purchased virtually every book available for wannabe solo practitioners. That didn't help. If anything, the details in all those books created more confusion.

Starting a law practice was actually relatively simple. I created a professional corporation, hired an accountant, rented virtual office space (for access to a conference room), purchased high-quality business cards online, obtained health and malpractice insurance, bought a cell phone, created an e-fax account for faxes, and purchased a multifunction device to serve as a laser printer, fax machine, and photocopier.

Creating my practice took less than a couple weeks, required relatively minimal effort and cost much less than imagined.

Here's the bottom line: The details of creating a law practice won't stop you from starting your firm. But other things may.

My major obstacle was fear. Before I started my practice, a myriad of thoughts crept into my mind, "Would I be able to find clients? Would I be looking for another job within six months? Would I be able to afford my bills?"

So, here was my reality. I had several people tell me they wanted to hire me after I started my practice. I

thought I had about ten estate planning clients on queue. Unfortunately, my timeline for doing their planning was much different than their timeline for doing their planning. I wanted to start immediately, but they seemed content to wait for several months (or years) before doing anything.

I left The Firm in the middle of April. Fortunately, a couple clients hired me immediately. But then, everything stopped.

Summers are traditionally slow in my practice. For some odd reason, people don't want to talk about death and taxes during the summertime. My phone stopped ringing, and to make matters worse, I was knocked on my back for most of the month of June as a result of a mountain biking injury.

Week after week after week and no one called. I was paralyzed by fear. My family warned me not to start my own practice. Maybe they were right. Oh crap, I thought, I might have to start looking for another job. Within three months, my bank account dropped several thousand dollars.

By mid-August, I knew I had to be proactive. Marketing was now my full-time job. I purchased every marketing book for professionals I could find. The best one was *Get Clients Now!* by C.J. Hayden. I read that book and followed it religiously.

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Virtually everyday, I met with other professionals for breakfast or lunch to talk about my practice. Gradually, my phone began to ring. With every dollar I made, I knew it extended the time I could remain on my own. My law practice became my freedom.

I've been practicing law, on my own, for four years now. I have not grown rich, but that was never my intention. I treat my clients well and practice law in a way that feels good for me. I have more balance in my life. Last year, I spent two months on vacation. I work 40 hours or less per week. Not bad for a 35-year-old, right?

Law firm associates ask me, "What is the key to starting your own practice?"

I promise you, the answer is not in the details. It's not even the number of

clients you have, or the money you've saved. What is absolutely critical is having a mentor and a strong community willing to offer you guidance and support along the way. No two paths are exactly the same. As each path is different, as unforeseen situations constantly arise, having a solid mentor and strong community is crucial.

If you want to start your own practice, you must find a group of people you trust completely; people who will be totally honest with you; people who will encourage, support and challenge you to do what you are meant to do.

I will not lie to you. Starting a law practice is difficult. Despite the difficulties, I have never regretted my decision. Because I was willing to take that risk, the options in my life have expanded exponentially. I create my

life exactly the way I want it to be. I choose my clients. I negotiate my deadlines. I set my rates. I am more relaxed than at any time I can remember. I enjoy my life. I love being a lawyer. I can't imagine having it any other way.

Tim Batdorf is an estate planning, probate, and business planning attorney with his law practice based in Troy. He is the Chairman of the Board of Directors for The Mankind Project - Windsor/Detroit Centre. He is a trained career coach and consultant through the Coaches Training Institute. Tim offers workshops for lawyers addressing marketing, solo practice, and life balance. Questions? Contact Tim at 248-797-9905.

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