

# Law Office Setup Essentials

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## Starting From Scratch: One Utah Attorney's Experience

Although I had always expected to end up as the owner of my own law firm, I never expected to start one as quickly as I did. It almost happened by accident when very shortly after I passed the bar exam, and before I had found a job with a firm that held any interest for me, a small number of acquaintances approached me and asked me to help them with legal issues that I felt I could readily handle. I asked them to give me some time to get properly organized as a law business and then the scramble to start-up began. I organized my business, registered with the State, purchased some malpractice coverage, opened up a business operating account, opened an IOLTA client trust account, and pulled together some legal services agreements. Once I accepted the work and obtained a retainer, my life as a solo/small firm attorney began. It was a bit of a whirlwind, but I soon realized that it wasn't as daunting as it had at first appeared.

I imagine that this part of my story is not incredibly unique. While some attorneys' journey into solo or small firm practice is slightly more deliberate than mine, everyone has to start somewhere. I've learned a number of things along the way. I've made some mistakes, and I've made some very good decisions. My hope is that I can share some of each so that your solo or small firm venture can benefit from my experience.

Below, I have listed a few resources that I feel may be very helpful to a small firm attorney just getting their practice up and running. Obviously this is not a comprehensive list, but it represents a number of resources that I have found to be extremely useful as I have started my law practice.

## Office Setting Options

**Working out of Home:** Personally, I think that unless you have a successful track record as an attorney, you should probably not try to work exclusively out of your home. In my view, it raises some questions in the minds of potential clients regarding the strength of your practice. People are already nervous enough about turning their legal problems over to an attorney. They're going to be even more nervous if they turn their legal problem to an attorney who is struggling to even provide a separate location for their business. However, some attorneys feel quite differently, for instance check out the blogs of these two attorneys for more discussion of this topic in general:

<http://stayviolation.typepad.com/chucknewton/>

<http://untetheredlawyer.com/>

**Virtual Offices:** The idea is that you're renting a business location, rather than an office. These setups usually provide a mailing address, a virtual phone number and answering service, conference rooms or office spaces that can be rented by the hour for client meetings, and receptionist service, some limited secretarial services and office equipment services (fax, copier, virtual server space, etc.) *DaVinci Virtual* is one that I am familiar with. Typically you can get setup with one of these services starting for around \$300/mo. See [www.davincivirtual.com](http://www.davincivirtual.com)

**Virtual Receptionists:** There are a number of companies out there that will answer your phone for you and then transfer it to your home phone, or cell phone after the receptionist has contacted you to tell you that you have a call waiting. You can then accept the call or transfer to voicemail. Not all services are created equally. But there are some that are very professional and can create a very polished introduction to your law practice. With these, you usually get what you pay for. But that first impression is more important than you might imagine. A couple of options include:

[www.davincivirtual.com](http://www.davincivirtual.com)

[www.callruby.com](http://www.callruby.com)

Also, just try a Google search on "virtual receptionist." Then check the options out. Many will have a free 30 day trial so that you can evaluate their services. Be aware however, that you might have to deal with some headaches with the transferring of phone numbers from phone service providers.

**Executive Suites:** Monthly costs typically range from \$500-\$1,500 (or higher) depending upon square footage, location, provided amenities, window views, etc. A benefit of these is that there is typically a shared receptionist, and shared office machines (copiers, fax machines, printers, etc.). Some of these even have exercise rooms and showers for use by the tenants. They typically all have conference rooms that can be rented or reserved.

## Online Resources for Law Practice Management

**AbacusLaw "Complete Startup Guide."** In exchange for your contact information and some attempts by a salesperson to contact you about purchasing Abacus Attorney, you can download a free guide that is a pretty good resource for getting you started thinking about some of the things you should consider when starting a law practice: [http://www.abacuslaw.com/forms/contact\\_us/startup.php](http://www.abacuslaw.com/forms/contact_us/startup.php)

**Solo Practice University:** This is a potentially promising resource for mentorship on starting a new law firm. The idea here is that for a monthly or annual fee, you can watch instructional videos by successful solo and small firm attorneys about a host of practice management issues, substantive legal introductions, etc. The whole philosophy to this website is that law school never prepares attorneys to actually practice law. This attempts to fill that gap. It's worth checking out.

<http://solopracticeuniversity.com/about/>

**“MyShingle” Blog:** One of the more well-known solo practitioner blogs out there. Attorney Carolyn Elefant blogs about all things solo. A good source for inspiration and encouragement with regard to starting and building your law practice. <http://www.myshingle.com>

**Jay Foonberg: How to Start and Build a Law Practice, 5<sup>th</sup> ed.:** Some people think that Mr. Foonberg is a little out of touch with building a modern law practice. And he may be a little behind on technology, a fact that he readily admits. However, there is a great deal of excellent information in this guide for a new solo attorney. I have avoided making dozens upon dozens of mistakes due to the things I first learned about in this book. It has been a fantastic resource for me. I highly recommend it.

## Law Practice Management Software

Traditionally, law practice management software has been client/server based. While these are typically more powerful and scalable as your firm grows to a firm with multiple attorneys at staff, there are downsides. For instance, they’re typically pricey, software updates can be cumbersome and expensive, if your hardware goes down (server crashes, and you have no built-in redundancy) then your office can really grind to a halt if you become very dependent upon this software. A couple examples of this type of solution are:

**Abacus Attorney:** [www.abacuslaw.com](http://www.abacuslaw.com)

**Amicus Attorney:** [www.amicusattorney.com](http://www.amicusattorney.com)

Two companies are really leading out in the SaaS (software as a service) realm. These are internet-based law practice management solutions:

**Clio:** [www.goclio.com](http://www.goclio.com) (I use Clio and really like it. They are working very hard to add great features to it on a regular basis.)

**Rocket Matter:** [www.rocketmatter.com](http://www.rocketmatter.com)

The benefits of SaaS for law practice management include automatic software updates/upgrades, accessibility from any computer or mobile device with an internet connection, flexible pricing models, no hardware maintenance or failures to worry about, frees up need for office real estate for equipment, etc. Negatives include the fact that they are not as feature rich as traditional client/server software. Web interface is not always as slick or fast as other solutions. If your internet connection is down, so are you. Data security is always a concern, but many will argue that data security in an offsite location is no more at risk than it is in your actual office.

## Office Equipment

**Scanners:** A paperless office may not be entirely possible, but digital storage space is far less expensive than physical storage space. However, in order to make this possible, you really need a good high-speed scanner and a good digital file storage system.

**Fujitsu ScanSnap S510:** a great little desktop scanner. Scans up to 50 sheets at a time into PDF format. Comes bundled with Adobe Acrobat Standard. Very quick, very simple.

**Data Storage:** Consider using a NAS (Network Attached Storage) system to serve as a centralized file server for your office. This can provide a secure, central location to store your important digital files for the entire office. They substitute for a full-blown file server, they take up much less space, can protect data from hard-drive crashes, and have large storage capacities (currently 4-8 TB is typical) without the expense and complexity of a traditional file server with a full operating system.

**Whiteboard & Easel:** I have found this simple office item to be indispensable to helping me to illustrate difficult legal concepts to clients. Anytime you can visually represent a legal concept, clients are incredibly appreciative. Stick-man drawings really can go a long way to helping people understand what we as attorneys spent years working out in our minds under the tutelage of cryptic professors.

**Fax Machines:** Fax machines now frequently come bundled with small office printers. This might be a very simple option. However, I've found that physical fax machines can really tie you down. I prefer using an e-fax solution. These allow incoming faxes to be emailed to you as a PDF document so that you can obtain it and print it anywhere that you can access your email. Also, you can send faxes by simply scanning your document to a PDF file and using the e-fax service from anywhere that you have an internet connection. It also saves desk/office "real estate." These usually run between \$10-20 per month.

[www.efax.com](http://www.efax.com)

[www.fax.com](http://www.fax.com)

[www.trustfax.com](http://www.trustfax.com)