



The Nuts and Bolts of a Virtual Law Office

BY CHARLES "CHUCK" NEWTON

I saw a sign that read, "The truth will set you free; but first it will [tick] you off." Nowhere is that more profoundly stated than in the realization that you can move your law practice home. I get hate mail about my position. Well, I actually get emails, direct messages, posts, comments, and Tweets, to prove my point. The home office practice of law is the virtual practice of law. They are bedfellows.

The displeasure occurs when a lawyer deconstructs a traditional law office only to determine that what is actually needed to effectively and comfortably operate from home is not much. The home office is as easy as pie to conceive, set up, and manage. The key to understanding and feeling comfortable with moving home is to not overly complicate the concept, as a home office harmonizes well the work/life balance that most attorneys yearn to achieve. That knowledge offers little vindication to those who spend a small fortune on space, staff, commutes, and overhead.

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But times are changing. The economic downturn has lawyers worried. Now, I receive inquiries on what it takes to establish a home law practice.

The nuts and bolts of a move home require only three things — faith, broadband, and telephony. The rest is just accessorizing. It is the practice of law's best bargain, and it can be as easy and inexpensive to achieve as you care to allow.

Moving home is not about space or the lack thereof. Space is all around us. In the past, most home-based attorneys would jokingly refer to themselves as a "sparerroom tycoon" after James Chan's book of the same name. Today, cheap tech would allow for the less satirical moniker of "no room tycoon." Attorneys primarily practice where they are, wherever they are, and everywhere they are. Therefore, if a set space is less important in today's legal world, a fixed space outside the home is primarily extraneous.

A home-based practice is also not about client retention. How do attorneys get clients and cases otherwise? In this regard, the home office is likely a neutral.

Finally, the home office is not about warehousing. As staff evolve into virtual assistants, partners transform into online collaborators, and files decamp to hard drives, warehousing is no longer necessary.

With this understanding, the first requirement for creating a home-based law practice is faith. You can call it confidence, acceptance, conviction, revelation, un-hesitancy, determination, or whatever you like. It is the stiffening process, the mental starch, or the courage that allows lawyers to know, with all issues not first answered, the move home will be profitable and workable, and professional fulfillment will come. It represents the brute necessity of believing that a move home is best. It enables lawyers to give their time and energy to shaping their new age reality. It is the realization that moving home is not a gambler's bet that has a greater chance of turning out more wrong than right, but which represents an act, an intention, a project that leads to a leap into the future. It is enthusiasm for change. It is a focus more on the personal life. It is passionate intuition. With it, the move home is possible and comfortable; without it, less so. It is the realization that the home law office offers no greater risk than the viability of any law practice, and probably less so because of reduced overhead.

Telecommuting and dial-up services have become antiquated concepts. The home law office survives and thrives by virtue of low-cost, available, and reliable receipt and distribution of digital information sent over high-bandwidth channels, or



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broadband. Whether home-based attorneys subscribe to cable, DSL, WiFi, a 3G network, or a combination of these, broadband is important in that it provides the connectivity that makes communication, collaboration, and paperless practices possible without the need for an outside office.

Deconstructing the traditional law office further, there is no one who cannot be reached, no document that cannot be filed or exchanged, or banking or billing that cannot be realized with online filing, email, Internet faxing, online banking, or, if all else fails, the use of the U.S. Postal Service or overnight delivery services.

Broadband needs only a few contrivances to effectively meet this objective. First is a computer of any type or model, but a dual core laptop with sufficient memory, storage, and the latest software works well. It provides an office in a box that can be taken anywhere. For operating paperlessly, I find a second LCD monitor helps, as does a small, inexpensive scanner, such as the Fujitsu ScanSnap. The need for printing documents is greatly limited, but a ScanSnap combined with an older printer practically eliminates the need for a copier, except for the largest of printing jobs. If backup and automated file sharing is an issue, syncing software, such as Microsoft's Live Mesh, allows you to

maintain and update files on multiple computers effortlessly. If you need a web-based case collaboration tool to maintain case notes, calendars, and reminders; to share and archive documents; and to obtain feedback from clients and referral sources, then there are easy-to-use, inexpensive online systems called extranets, such as Basecamp. Services such as eFax provide online faxing and receiving of documents, and you can send certified mail from your computer through **onlinecertifiedmail.com**. There are also any number of online legal research sites.

Telephone communications, the Internet, and computers are quickly converging, but whether landline, wireless, VoIP, cell phone technology, web conferencing, or a combination of these, person-to-person conferencing is still the lifeblood of a legal practice. For the home office lawyer, the question is how to effectively and cheaply make and receive telephone calls. For calling out, any of these methods will do. For calling in, the telephone can prove too stationary or too disruptive. Attorneys or staff in diverse locations, or the varying availability of phone systems as you move about, can be issues. Alone in your home law practice, you might want to consider something such as Grand Central or Google Voice that provides you one number that rings all of your phones, provides voice prompts, screens calls, and allows conference calls. In a group, you might need to consider a virtual PBX such as Onebox, Vocalocity, or any number of similar online services that can provide you a central local or toll-free number, online fax services, auto attendant and recorded greetings, call forwarding, voicemail to email, and follow me technologies. All are relatively inexpensive and easy to set up, and none require any equipment.

A lawyer can start a law practice from home for a few thousand dollars, maintain it for hundreds of dollars a month, and make a reasonable living in the process. It is neither difficult nor impossible. It just requires following the three rules mentioned earlier. The conflict occurs because we are accustomed to material possessions, and we organize our priorities around access to these. Whether offices, furnishings, equipment, signs, toll tags, staff, or perceived status, these extra possessions outside of our homes offer us an emotional attachment beyond any practical benefit or usefulness, and letting go is often difficult. The practice of law is not about physical property. It is about intellectual property and the high tech means by which we communicate what we know in this day and age.



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