Pros and Cons of a Virtual Office

Volume 15 Issue 6

By Jayne Sykora

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Like many of you reading this, I graduated from law school and walked into one of the worst legal job markets in twenty-five years. After passing the bar and spending a few months job hunting to no avail, I decided to team up with another new lawyer friend to start our own law firm. As you would expect, this idea was, at first, completely overwhelming and daunting. We had no clients, little legal experience, and essentially no money. However, we felt strongly that we could form and build a successful business. Plus, we had the time to be methodical, strategic, and resourceful as we started our firm.

Our main goal was to keep overhead as low as possible because we did not know how much money we would earn initially. That meant not being able to afford the rent for a traditional office space, which is often the largest single expense for any law firm. Indeed, our initial plan was to operate the business out of our homes. However, we quickly realized that working exclusively from our homes was probably not the best approach. Did we want clients knowing our home addresses? Which home address would we use as our business address? How would we coordinate our phone lines? Where would we meet with our clients? Would clients consider us legitimate without office space? Thankfully, all of our questions were solved by our discovery of virtual offices.

What is a virtual office? According to Wikipedia, it is "a combination of off-site live communication and address services that allow users to reduce traditional office costs while maintaining business professionalism." In other words, a virtual office provides our firm with many of the amenities of a traditional office, but without many of the overhead costs and the lease commitment.

The management company we work with offered us the option of four different virtual office packages. The basic package provides a business mailing address, with a la carte administrative services, while the most comprehensive package includes personal phone answering of a phone line(s), voicemail boxes, secretarial services, and access to conference room space. We selected a package that provides a business mailing address, personal phone answering of our firm phone lines, and 16 hours per month of conference room space.

Pros of the virtual office

The number one advantage of a virtual office for us is a very low monthly cost. For a couple hundred dollars per month, we have everything we need to run our firm. Another benefit is that our virtual office is a month-to-month lease. Therefore, if and when we do decide to make a change, we can do so in a relatively timely manner with no worries about waiting for a lease to expire or incurring penalties for breaking a lease early. Also, our landlord gives us the flexibility to meet clients at four different locations throughout the metropolitan area, which allows us to easily meet with clients where it is most convenient for them. Finally, one of the biggest draws to our virtual office is the ability to work from home much of the time. On so many mornings it is delightful that my commute is simply a walk down the hallway to my desk.

Cons of the virtual office

Although I just raved about my lack of commute, there are also drawbacks to working from home. There can be a variety of distractions at home that would not be in an office setting. For example, others you live with may not realize when you really are working and may interrupt you or make too much noise for you to be able to concentrate.

Another drawback is that the virtual office is not ours. Although our conference room spaces are comfortable and have great staffs, it can feel as though we are guests because we are not in the office every day. Further, we have limited access to after-hours or weekend use of the facilities, which can sometimes be an inconvenience.

Even with the drawbacks, we have been satisfied overall with our experience with a virtual office. It has been nearly a year since we set up our virtual office, and I am happy to report that our small firm is doing very well. Initially, we thought our virtual office would be a temporary stop-gap until we grew a bit and had a steady workflow. However, now that we have a steady stream of business, we have no intention of making any changes to our office arrangement anytime soon. In fact, our virtual office has proven to be one of the best decisions we could have made.

Help Is a Call or Click Away: The ABA Legal Technology Resource Center

Volume 15 Issue 6

By Joshua Poje

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Technology is constantly evolving. Each new technology brings the potential for improved efficiency and effectiveness plus the risk of wasted dollars, useless distractions, and even professional responsibility missteps. Striking the appropriate balance between technical sophistication and prudent business is a daunting challenge for lawyers. For members, however, resources are available to help you meet this challenge head on.

For more than fifteen years, the ABA's Legal Technology Resource Center (LTRC) has helped lawyers find ways to use technology more effectively. Our staff includes lawyers, law librarians, and legal professionals who continually research, write, and educate lawyers about the latest technology trends, obstacles, and opportunities. Whether you are a new solo practitioner adrift without the help of an IT staff, a young associate looking for an edge, or in-house counsel struggling to find ways to be more cost-effective, the LTRC has resources and expertise that can help.

Below are just some of the services and products the LTRC provides to members.

ABA TechEZ (www.abanet.org/techez). Many technology purchases end in frustration and disappointment. Firms and legal departments stretch their budgets to find room for the latest technology, only to find their investments wasted when the technology is implemented poorly or never utilized fully. The LTRC developed ABA TechEZ to help with both ends of the technology challenge: getting the best price on important technology and making sure that staff and attorneys get the practical training to make the most of that technology.

Through ABA TechEZ, members receive significant savings on some of the most popular products and services on the market. We also offer members free weekly training events, usually lasting 15 minutes or less, on focused and practical technology topics, such as wiping metadata from electronic documents or managing your e-mail in Microsoft Outlook. All training sessions are recorded and stored in a members-only library that you can access from your home or office at your convenience.

Technology Hotline. Have a technology question? We can help. The LTRC's professional staff is available by phone at (312) 988-5465 or by e-mail at ltrc@americanbar.org to answer your questions, whether it is as simple as explaining an unfamiliar technology term or helping you identify key technology for your new law office.

Site-tation (www2.americanbar.org/sitetation/). Site-tation is the LTRC's legal technology blog, running continually for nearly a decade. Staying on top of the latest technology news, tips, and issues is our full-time focus. On the blog, we feature the important and helpful news and resources that we come across in our day-to-day research. Posts range from new product announcements to security alerts to roundups of practice management tips. Site-tation is also available as a monthly e-newsletter [http://mail.abanet.org/scripts/wa.exe?SUBED1=site-tation&A=1] and as an RSS feed [http://feeds2.feedburner.com/ABASitetation].

Annual Legal Technology Survey (http://bit.ly/dL9ZYt). Every year the LTRC surveys members in private practice about their current technology use. The data, collected into six volumes and also presented in an executive summary, covers everything from basic technology budgeting decisions to the use of social media and other cutting-edge tools. The survey is available at a discount for members through the ABA Web Store (www.ababooks.org) and can be found on the shelves of many law libraries around the country.

LTRC website (www.lawtechnology.org). In addition to the resources mentioned above, the LTRC website hosts a large repository of helpful legal technology content. The website offers brief overviews of popular technology topics, intended to provide a basic introduction to even the most techno-phobic lawyer. Also featured are detailed articles, comparison charts for common legal software, including case management, time and billing, and litigation support, and even a free legal research search engine that searches more than 400 law reviews and law journals.

If you want to stay up-to-date on the latest technology topics, as well as new benefits for members from the LTRC, follow us on Twitter at http://twitter.com/ltrc.

Internet Marketing for Young Lawyers

Volume 15 Issue 6

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the digitaledge

Sooner rather than later, a senior lawyer is going to ask you about your "book of business" and marketing plan. Chances are that this early in your career you have not yet made the business connections and achieved the professional successes that help build a client list and sophisticated marketing plan. However, you do have one important marketing tool that does not require years of experience: the Internet.

Online marketing will not replace years of quality work and hard-fought successes, but it is a simple and inexpensive way to shape your professional persona and make it available to a multitude of potential clients and employers. Take advantage of the following places to market yourself online.

Make your online employer bio stand out. Even though firm websites are typically designed by Internet marketing professionals, the content is notoriously uninspired. Use some creativity to help your bio stand out, such as writing in the first person, adding appropriate personal information, or even including your cell phone number so that you will be the first person a potential client can reach. Make sure your firm bio has your name, specialty, city and state. These words are the keywords that lead potential clients to you.

Maintain your state bar online profile. Sophisticated clients often search for lawyers through databases maintained by state bar associations. State bar websites often allow their members to provide basic biographies and contact information, and to customize their listings with personal photos, relevant links, a Martindale-Hubbell rating, and other information. Make sure this data is current and add as much detail as permitted by the ethics rules in your jurisdiction.

Participate in lawyer rating websites. Depending upon your practice, lawyer rating websites may also be a potential source of clients. Avvo.com allows lawyers to complete their bios on the site as well as answer questions from potential clients. The more questions you answer, the higher you "rank" on the site and the more you will appear to be an expert. You can opt to receive an e-mail from Avvo.com when a question pertaining to your practice area is posed on the website so that you can respond and potentially connect with a client. However, when participating in lawyer rating website such as Avvo, be sure to pay attention to advertising rules, and double-check that you are not violating your law firm's policies by participating on these types of websites.

Create a personal website or blog. Because many lawyers switch jobs within the first decade of practice, it is wise to create a more permanent placemarker on the Internet so clients can find you after a move. A professional blog or a simple "yourname.com" website offer some online permanency and opportunities for more expression than a simple online bio. A blog is a good place to make your mark as an authority. However, blogs are time-consuming and many firms are fearful of lawyers offering commentary that might offend a client or conflict with a legal position taken by the firm on behalf of a client. Start a blog or a personal webpage only if you have the time, inclination, and approval. Whichever placemarker you choose, be mindful of advertising rules and requirements in your jurisdiction.

Use social networking. Social networking sites, such as Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn, can be easy ways to foster your professional persona by discussing new cases and developments in your practice area. Like your online bio, keep your profile and posts on networking sites professional. On Twitter, followers tend to flock to people with interesting "tweets," but many cultivate a long list of followers by simply "retweeting" others' interesting comments. To make your posts as searchable as possible, use keywords such as "lawyer" and the name of your state as often as you can. On Facebook, responsible and limited updates may "remind" family, friends, and other connections about your practice, or you can use the "groups" option to send only business-type posts to certain Facebook friends. If you do not feel comfortable mixing your personal Facebook page with your professional persona, you can create a second Facebook page or a fan page for your professional self, which you could make viewable by the public. Facebook in particular is highly optimized, and public Facebook pages often rank high in online searches. Lastly, LinkedIn keeps you connected to other professionals, which may lead to introductions to potential clients and others who may benefit your practice through referrals.

If you invest a small amount of time fostering your online professional persona, the next time a senior lawyer asks you about your book of business and marketing plan, you can say with confidence that you have a plan—and you may even have the clients to show for it.

Survival Tips for Lawyers from Diverse Backgrounds

Volume 15 Issue 6

By Archana Vaidhvanathan

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I remember the day I received my first acceptance letter to law school. As usual, I had just come home from a long day at the office and was exhausted. I had spent my day meeting with clients and working on a project due the next day. You see, I was already a lawyer in India and I absolutely loved it. However, after practicing in India for a little less than two years, I knew that I wanted something different. So, after some soul searching, I decided to apply to law schools in the United States. The following year, I enrolled at a New York law school.

In the United States, my life changed dramatically. American law schools are vastly different than Indian law schools. Not harder, but different. Similarly, law practice in the United States presented a unique set of challenges, different from those I encountered as a lawyer in India. As any young lawyer knows, practicing law in the United States can be a very challenging experience. However, it can be even more challenging if you come from a background where the rules and norms are quite different. But as challenging as it has been, my practice has been successful. And, without a doubt, my success stems in part from my diverse experiences and strategies I have learned to deal with new challenges. Throughout my journey, I have discovered some practical tips that have helped me succeed as a lawyer from a diverse background.

Identify an area of specialty. When I started practicing in India, I sought to distinguish myself from others. In India, I practiced business law, an area that I found I enjoyed. Once in the United States, I chose to continue specializing in business law. To develop my skills, I immersed myself in business law by learning from other business lawyers and taking numerous business law CLEs. Undoubtedly, a lawyer who develops a special skill set in a specific practice area makes herself extremely valuable to both her employer and her clients. For me, having knowledge of India's legal process, business climate, and customs has been beneficial. My diverse background is an asset to my practice that enhances and differentiates my value to clients.

Find a mentor. My practice would not be what it is today without my mentors. Whether it was to pass the bar or to better understand the Uniform Commercial Code, I always called my mentors for advice. And sometimes, I just called to vent. Whenever I felt discouraged about my practice or did not understand a legal issue, my mentors provided guidance. Unsurprisingly, my mentors almost always faced similar issues during their careers.

There is always another lawyer who is willing to be your mentor. They have been where you are now. It really is not hard to find that mentor. You just have to know where to look. If you, like me, are a lawyer from a diverse background, you can seek a mentor through your local minority bar associations. Local minority bar associations provide a wonderful forum to interact with similar diverse professionals. The Young Lawyers Division's Diversity Team and its Minorities in the Profession Committee also have an exhaustive list of diverse mentors.

Get involved. In law school, I volunteered with the student and local bar associations. After moving to California, I got involved with local bar associations and other nonlegal professional organizations. This involvement familiarized me with local practice customs, kept me abreast of legal developments, and also provided a forum to meet diverse legal professionals.

Through all stages of professional growth, it is important to interact with professionals and stay involved with professional organizations. For legal professionals, this could be through a combination of involvement in voluntary bar associations, developing mentoring relationships, and accessing other professional resources.

ABA-EPA Law Office Climate Challenge: One Firm's Experience

Volume 15 Issue 6

By Phillip R. Bower

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A colleague recently asked me to prepare responses to a multipage portion of an RFP for potential new business that requested information about our law firm's internal sustainability initiatives. The RFP covered a broad range of issues from waste reduction to energy conservation to greenhouse gas reduction. Fortunately, our firm was able to respond positively to many of the questions, in part due to our participation in the ABA-EPA Law Office Climate Challenge (Challenge).

What is the ABA-EPA Law Office Climate Challenge?

The ABA's Section of Environment, Energy, and Resources (SEER) and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) initiated the Challenge in 2007 as a way to encourage law offices to take simple, practical steps to become better environmental and energy stewards. It focuses on two issues that almost all law offices encounter—paper and energy usage—and is separated into four programs:

- Best practices for office paper management: Implement policies regarding double-sided printing and copying, buy paper with a specified recycled content, and increase recycling.
- EPA's WasteWise: Adopt best practices for office paper management and quantify the benefits.
- EPA's Green Power Partnership: Buy electricity from renewable sources, such as solar or wind.
- EPA's ENERGY STAR: Adopt an energy management plan designed for law offices, and set an electricity reduction goal of at least 10 percent.

A law firm can become a partner in any or all of programs and can participate on a firm-wide or office-specific basis.

Why get involved?

At my firm, the idea of participating in the Challenge was initiated by several environmental and sustainability attorneys, including me. We were aware of the Challenge through our involvement with SEER committees and became interested for both professional and personal reasons. We were already assisting clients with participation in voluntary sustainability and green certification programs for their businesses, so we thought going through the process internally would allow us to give better advice. Our clients were starting to ask the companies they do business with about their sustainability initiatives, and we knew it would not be long until our firm was asked the same questions. We also saw opportunities to help our firm save money during the recession by becoming more energy efficient and reducing waste. And we generally believe that conservation is the right thing to do.

When we reached out for additional volunteers, we were overwhelmed by the positive response. We learned that other attorneys and staff at our firm were working independently on similar issues. The records department was trying to reduce paper files through increased electronic storage, while the information technology team was evaluating ways to cut energy usage by servers and computer hardware. The office managers were exploring how to make supply purchases more sustainable and reduce waste from meetings and break rooms. The Challenge gave us a reason and a process to address and solve these issues together.

How does my office implement the Challenge?

The ABA's <u>Challenge website</u> provides great resources on how to implement the programs. Below are some ways my firm has worked to implement the Challenge. We have achieved partnership under the best practices for the office paper program and are still actively working to implement other policies, some of which go beyond the Challenge's scope.

Do your homework. Before approaching our firm's leadership about the Challenge, a small team of attorneys prepared a summary memo that addressed key cost and benefit points. We obtained general figures related to the firm's paper and electricity usage and the availability and cost of recycled paper and green energy programs offered by our office's local utilities. We also explained additional benefits that could result from becoming a partner in the Challenge.

Form a Challenge committee. Attorneys and staff interested in these issues joined the committee. Staff members provided invaluable practical input and were able to spend time researching ideas when the attorneys had to attend to billable matters. We also formed three subcommittees—waste and purchasing, energy, and service and education—that could research ideas and report back to the full committee.

Start small and be mindful. Our committee spent its first year brainstorming ideas, gathering information (e.g., does paper in our recycling bins actually get recycled?), and addressing the "low hanging fruit" issues (e.g., modifying our paper practices to meet the requirements f the Challenge). We also tried to be mindful of how a policy might impact the way an attorney practices. The diversity of the committee helped us to anticipate concerns, test ideas with small groups of staff, and simplify policies before rolling them out.

Measure and communicate results. Entering its second year, the committee continues to address new ideas to reduce waste and energy usage. We created an internal website with educational material and information on firm programs, such as cell phone recycling and our participation in the 's One Million Trees

Project. We are exploring how to measure and quantify the results (e.g., money saved and greenhouse gases reductions) so we know what is working and what might need to be revisited. We also hope to make the information available on our website so that others can learn from our experiences.

April 2011 Calendar

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- **APR. 5** ADDING ELDER LAW TO YOUR PRACTICE
- APR. 6 TRENDS IN THE ACQUISITION OF PUBLIC COMPANIES: INSIGHTS FROM THE 2010 STRATEGIC BUYER
- APR. 7 THE NEW STARK SELF-DISCLOSURE PROTOCOL: A NEW SOLUTION
- APR. 13 SMALL BUSINESS BASICS
- APR. 20 PRE-MARITAL AGREEMENTS: REPRESENTING THE STRONGER PARTY; REPRESENTING THE WEAKER PARTY
- APR. 21 ANTI-KICKBACK LAW BASICS
- **APR. 27** VIACOM V. UTUBE: WHETHER THIRD-PARTY CONTRIBUTORY COPYRIGHT INFRINGEMENT REALLY EXISTS FOR MORE INFORMATION, SEE "EVENTS AND CLE."