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INTRODUCTION TO WORKING REMOTELY - A GUIDE TO SMALL FIRM PRACTICE

In law school I was asked by other students, professors, and lawyers, “What kind of law do you want to practice?” My answer was, “The kind you can practice from an Airstream trailer on a beach in Florida.” During my third year I started researching how I might set up my practice to be able to work from anywhere. While the process is still evolving, I think we are off to a pretty good start based on the amount of good natured teasing I get about how often Zena and I are out of the office. Immediately after the teasing, I get asked a ton of questions about how I have managed to be able to set up my practice so that I can work remotely as much as I do. With that in mind, I decided to write this article to answer some of these questions and hopefully motivate others to consider doing likewise.

For those of you that do not know us, we are a small office with two attorneys, a paralegal, and an office manager. We have family law cases over most of northeast Tennessee, and I handle immigration law cases in various jurisdictions including Tennessee, Louisiana, and Florida.

I tend to be out of the office at least one week every other month for immigration cases in other states; to work from home so I can concentrate on large projects; and I try to schedule a full week of vacation every 90 days. When I'm out of the office, I am still working in some form or fashion, even on vacation.

Why do we take time off? I've found getting “away from everything” is a good way to clear my head, get a new perspective on things, and regroup. The most important benefit I've found for myself is that it gives me a chance to think. Often when I'm away, I'll stumble on a new approach or a solution for a case that has been troublesome. It's amazing what you can accomplish when you aren't bombarded with distractions.

When I started investigating how I could work anywhere in the world I wanted without being chained to an office, I was afraid that I was going to have to learn to be a technology guru. Little did I know, nothing could be further from the truth. Today, you don't have to know that much about computers to make everything work. I was also afraid that I was going to have to buy a lot of expensive equipment. This was also wrong. If you have electricity, an internet connection, a laptop, and a cell phone you already have all you need.

In getting started, the single most important thing you must do is decide that you are going to it. Once you make the decision that you are going to set up your practice to allow you to work from home, the beach, or even Walt Disney World, half the battle is won. As long as you are “looking into it,” you will never actually be taking the steps necessary to make having a virtual office a reality. As Walt Disney said, “The way to get started is to quit talking and begin doing.”

The first thing that needs to be decided is what type of work needs to be accomplished out in the field. You need to be able to: 1) Draft documents; 2) Review Files; 3) Initiate and Answer Telephone calls; 4) Email; 5) Bill; and 6) Stay on track. All of these tasks can be distilled down into these topics: A) Working with Paperless Files; B) Communicating with Clients; C) Getting Things Done. Over the next few months, I will be outlining how we dealt with each of these issues in other individual articles.

Here are some suggestions to help you escape being chained to your desk. First, don't worry about scanning old files or converting your old files to a new paperless format. Don't waste the energy. Second, only begin working with your newest files in the digital world. Third, do not give up paper entirely... yet. When you are first getting accustomed to this new digital frontier, it is helpful to also maintain a paper file that you can use as a reference and as a safety blanket. As your comfort with a digital practices increases, you will naturally begin to thin out the paper file and rely more on the digital file. Fourth, put time on your calendar to be out of the office to begin this process. You might want to schedule working from your home instead of the office just one day a week or every other week. If an emergency arises, you can run into the office to deal with it, but you can also start figuring out the solutions to problems you will inevitably encounter. In order for everything to work, you must give yourself the opportunity to make it happen. When you start working

remotely, you will run into some kind of problem that you don't know how to solve right away. However, my experience was that for every problem I ran into, a solution was usually a Google search or telephone call away. Once you have solved the problem once, the next time is much easier. There lots of resources out there that will

make this transition much easier than you think.

With these ideas in mind, let's dive in. I'll offer suggestions over the next few months that outline how we do things. There are tons of other options out there- I don't mean to suggest that our way is the only way. These ideas are what have worked for us. Along the way if you have questions, or want to talk about something, give us a call. We would be happy to help in any way we can. In the immortal words of Big Thunder Mountain Rail Road, “Hang on to them hats and glasses, 'cause this here is the wildest ride in the wilderness!”

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