



NICHOLAS GRINER | STAFF

Jane Sims launched a Towson law firm after spending eight years at DLA Piper and Miles & Stockbridge.

More attorneys going solo

AMY BURROUGHS | CONTRIBUTOR

Breaks from corporate firms offer freedom, unforeseen challenges

As a Harvard Law School student, Jane Sims never considered opening her own practice. Like the rest of her classmates, she prepared for a career at a large, corporate firm.

But after eight years with law firms DLA Piper and Miles & Stockbridge, Sims wanted to offer clients flat fees instead of hourly billing — a change she couldn't make without branching out on her own.

Five years after starting the Law Office of Jane Frankel Sims LLC in Towson, her fee model is paying off. Sims' estates and trusts practice has grown by 25 percent a year and surpassed \$1 million in annual revenue, she said, thanks in part to clients seeking financial certainty during the recession.

And, she said, the demands of running a business have proved just as rewarding as the legal work.

"I have the intellectual capacity to think about complex legal issues all day, but I'd rather think about those for part of the day and spend the other part of the day structuring and managing and running a business," she said.

Sims' story has become more common in recent years. The number of attorneys starting or gravitating toward solo practices is on the rise, mirroring a trend seen during the early to mid-1990s — another post-recession recovery period.

About 6.1 percent of 2011 law school graduates reported employment in solo practices, compared with 2.9 percent in 2006, according to the National Association for Law Placement.

But going solo isn't for everyone. Nicholas Proy, whose Finksburg-based practice provides legal counsel to small-business owners, said some lawyers are better off at corporate firms.

"If you don't have the business aspect of it down, it's very difficult to do," he said. "A lot of [attorneys] think because they're a lawyer, they can just go out and

do anything, and that's not always necessarily the case."

Proy, who opened his practice in 2010, said lawyers should seek advice from other solo practitioners before making the leap.

Once an attorney opens a new office, a top priority is finding clients.

James Hoffmann Jr., who recently opened a civil litigation, bankruptcy and estates practice in Annapolis, said he has used several strategies to get his name out. Hoffmann networks, sends announcements to colleagues and publications, accepts speaking engagements,



Hoffmann

mann said.

writes for a local newspaper and has scheduled an estate planning seminar for January. He also joined the Maryland State Bar Association's lawyer referral services.

"I'm out on my own and now it's time to really get going," Hoff-

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In the early months, he said, his strategy is to stay busy.

"If I'm working on a case and that takes my whole day, then I'm working on a case that day," he said. "If I'm in a lull, then I want to fill that time trying to think about ways that I can develop the practice."

Attorneys who consider opening solo practices expect to have a difficult time building clientele. But many are surprised by smaller problems that never arose in larger firms.

Hoffmann, for instance, said it has been tough to learn accounting systems.

"That's been a bigger undertaking than I would have anticipated," he said. "In the past, I would complete my time sheets, hand them to someone else and that was the end of it."

Ditto for L. Content McLaughlin, who six months ago left a Whiteford, Taylor & Preston partnership to open Bel Air-based McLaughlin Law Group. McLaughlin's biggest adjustment was no longer having firm infrastructure such as an IT department to fix her computer.



McLaughlin

"It did take me longer to get things organized and set up than I had anticipated, so that was definitely a hurdle," she said.

But both Hoffmann and McLaughlin said

the greater autonomy that comes with managing a solo practice has made it worth overcoming a few setbacks.

"I've got full control over my cases from start to finish," Hoffmann said. "I have the ability to make strategic decisions about litigation, and I handle all aspects of the case."

Simplicity is another benefit, McLaughlin said.

"I answer to my clients and my family now, and that's it," she said.

Dan Miller, who in June opened a personal injury practice after spending seven years with a boutique firm, said he's working to build his own future now.

"It was a situation where I was working really hard to make someone else successful, and I realized that I could and should be doing this ... to be successful myself," he said.



Miller

But, as all solo practitioners find, that success demands an exorbitant number of hours per week and offers no corporate vacation policy.

Sims, who works 80 to 100 hours a week, said she still struggles

to find time away from work.

"I'm my own boss, but I'm about the toughest boss on myself that you could ever find," she said. "I love what I do, but ... it'd be much easier if I had a boss who said, 'You need to leave and go on vacation.'"