

Size Up an Ideal Office Space

One of the earliest decisions a solo attorney must make is selecting an office.

By **Janet Falk** June 19, 2019

Whether you're planning to venture out on your own or you've been managing a solo practice for some time, you will encounter many business and operational issues that were not discussed in your law school education nor in your first position as a law clerk or an associate in private practice.

This is the first in a series of occasional columns, Best Practices for a Solo Practice, that will discuss how several attorneys with a solo practice manage various aspects of the business side of their firm, in an effort to share insights, highlight potential solutions and avoid costly mistakes.

One of the earliest decisions a solo attorney must make is selecting an office. Craig Dobson, with a practice focused on ethics and immigration at [Dobson Law](#), notes: "In New York, the Rules of Professional Conduct state that an attorney must indicate a 'principal law office address' in advertisements (Rule 7.1(h)). However, a virtual office may satisfy this requirement."

Dobson adds: "Out-of-state lawyers should be aware of New York Judiciary Law 470, requiring lawyers to have a physical office within the state. The law was upheld by the Second Circuit, to the surprise of many. And the New York City Bar Association opined this year that the definition of a proper office under Rule 7.1(h) should be the same as Judiciary Law 470, meaning that the onerous and outdated law may even have implications for resident lawyers, at least with respect to advertising."

Setting aside the RPC and New York Judiciary Law 470, many solo attorneys have opted for the low overhead of a dedicated workspace in their homes and work in a virtual office environment. According to William Stock, whose practice at [Law Office of William B. Stock](#) is writing appeals and motions, plus research: "With modern technology, all I really require is a laptop, quiet surroundings and a comfortable chair," plus a writing surface.

Zara Watkins champions the home office as well, in a small room with a desk and a paperless environment. She particularly enjoys not having to commute to her practice, [On Point Expertise](#), focused on appeals and substantive motions in state, federal and immigration cases. Eliminating that nonproductive time leaves her free to pursue other interests, including "yoga/meditation in the morning and pottering in my garden in the afternoon."

One downside of a home office is the noise factor, according to Charles-Eric Gordon, investigative counsel at [Law Office of Charles-Eric Gordon](#). The noises from "young children, barking dogs and ringing doorbells" interfered with the professional atmosphere he sought. He later found a near-idyllic environment as a subtenant in a CPA firm; other subtenants are financial advisors and independent

accountants. Gordon shuts the office door for quiet and finds he is “energized by being around other hard-working, creative professionals. There are always people to schmooze with and networking opportunities abound,” he adds.

Stock agrees with this social aspect. Although he works from home, he occasionally visits an office “that is a cross between a sub-tenancy and a virtual office,” where he can receive visitors. The real plus is “the camaraderie is wonderful,” says Stock.

That same sought-after collegiality, plus the perks of a shared kitchen and conference rooms, may tip the scales to a co-working space or an office suite. Andrew Berks, whose practice at [Berks IP Law](#) focuses on intellectual property, patents and litigation, prefers an office out of the house. There are fewer distractions and he does not feel isolated. Previously, traversing Manhattan for meetings and events meant Berks “was hopping between Starbucks and various libraries to stop and get a little work done on the road. It was very inefficient.” Berks wanted an onsite office where he could settle down and concentrate.

Consequently, Berks has experimented with several office settings: Law Firm Suites, then moving to ServCorp and now WeWork. He notes that, unlike the other office suite settings, at WeWork there are no additional charges for services, costs are predictable and “I appreciate that I can use WeWork locations elsewhere.” In addition, it has been beneficial to “meet people who have helped my business.” These factors would not obtain in his own office with a landlord; there would be “much higher costs, including a long-term lease, getting furniture, telecom, copier, etc.,” Berks noted.

Another solo practitioner at a co-working space agrees the environment enhances productivity and enriches his livelihood. Eric M. Sarver, who represents businesses in employment law matters at [The Law Offices of Eric M. Sarver](#), works at The Yard; he relishes speaking with “other attorneys whom I can bounce ideas off of, get feedback on a particular issue or just connect socially.” In addition, his business has increased by sheer proximity. “A number of businesses and professionals renting adjacent office space have become clients of mine, and we have further been able to assist one another professionally, by establishing community and a network.” Finally, location, location, location. The Yard is convenient to Penn Station, easing Sarver’s commute.

Camaraderie has its drawbacks, says Jesse Langel, with a practice of consumer debt collection defense at [The Langel Firm](#). “Office settings tend to force interactions with people who feel like talking. That tends to be counter-productive.” Langel uses “a combination of home office and a physical office on an as-needed basis.” Cost and flexibility are key; Langel has “lower overhead and more autonomy over where I choose to work,” and avoids distractions.

Craig Wolson, who leads [Wolson Litigation Support Group](#) with a practice focused on securities, lending and other finance, primarily works from home. He often uses the library and conference rooms of the Association of the Bar of the City of New York. If money were no object, Wolson would have an office near Grand Central. For now, he is mindful that more frequent use of the conference space at the City Bar for meetings with his clients might reach the limit of four-hours per week; having his own office would avoid that issue.

The advantages of a more spacious environment, coffee, snacks, plus camaraderie are attractive, as is the effect on clients. “I think clients want to see a real office,” says Berks.

Gordon agrees, adding that, as a subtenant, he has access to a notary and tech support. Gordon claims that his eclectic taste in furnishing his subtenant office and the available conference rooms put clients at ease. They “usually comment on its upscale appearance.” Accordingly, he has been able to raise his fees somewhat to cover the increased overhead.

As much as Watkins treasures her home office, she insists “Having a separated work space is crucial for maintaining a healthy boundary between your work and life. I may work from home, but I run my practice as if I work in an office. I have set times for sitting down at my desk in the morning and leaving it at the end of the day.” The only thing she would add is “a fancy couch or chair for clients.”

If you can’t make up your mind, Sarver encourages home-office based attorneys to “try a month-to-month membership at a co-working space nearby.” He notes: “There are different styles and types of co-working – many of which have a very professional atmosphere. Find the style and ambiance that matches your tastes and your clientele.”

Now that you’ve reviewed the requirements of the Rules of Professional Conduct, and considered your peers’ feedback on the pluses and minuses of a home office, subtenancy, office suite and co-working space, it’s time to test the options. Examine your budget, your need for conference space, your desire for camaraderie, your tolerance for distraction, the potential for networking, the access to multiple locations and the value of freely available coffee and snacks in arriving at your decision for an office.

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