

# Introduction

So you're thinking about starting your own law firm? Whether you're doing so because you're tired of answering to a boss, haven't found your dream legal job (or any legal job), or have always intended to open your own practice, congratulations for taking this first step. Starting your own firm is overwhelming, but done right, it will provide flexibility, financial independence, and a thriving career. The best part is, you don't need much money to get started.

This book is designed to walk you through every step of starting a law firm—the right way, and without breaking the bank. Instead of having to wing it, you can follow this step-by-step guide to ensure you don't miss a single critical step as you turn your JD into a successful business. Starting out with a strong foundation will ensure you have everything in place to make your firm last and generate lots of money.

When I first became an attorney, I never thought I would own my own firm. In 2011, I graduated from the University of San Diego School of Law, took the California bar exam, passed, and was suddenly a licensed attorney. Thanks to a position as a law clerk that I started as a 2L, I luckily secured an associate position while still a law student. I resumed work as a law clerk immediately after a post-bar trip to Thailand, and once I got sworn in as an attorney, I got to add that beautiful “Esq.” to my name.

I went to law school to become an immigration attorney, and even though I dabbled in other areas of the law as a backup, immigration law is what I love. My first job as an associate was working for a solo practitioner in the immigration law field. I was the first associate this attorney ever had.

My boss was a good man, and he was flexible with my schedule. If I needed to take off for a personal appointment or a last-minute trip, he always allowed me to go, so as long as I stayed on top of my work. But he often fell behind in paying me. I knew it wasn't intentional; he simply lacked the business management skills, and thus the funds, to meet my salary requirements. As a young attorney fresh out of law school with mounds of student loan debt, I desperately needed a steady paycheck.

However, this did force me to learn to network and bring in new clients. I joined networking groups, went to bar association events, and volunteered at immigration-related events in the community. Because I was such a new and young attorney, I did not bring in much business at first, but I learned a ton. All of which served me tremendously when

I opened my own firm, and I will pass this on to you later in the book. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Just over a year after I began working as an associate, my boss finally realized he could not afford to keep me on as an attorney and let me go. Fortunately, I had seen this coming and was already putting feelers out in the legal community. In the meantime, I took on a couple cases of my own, starting a hastily made law firm with a P.O. box and borrowed office space from an attorney I knew well from networking. Looking back, I'm glad that did not last long, because I was not prepared to run my own firm.

A few weeks after I was laid off, I received an offer to join a well-known and respected immigration law firm in downtown San Diego. I was ecstatic. I was joining a larger firm, and I would receive a slight pay raise. I looked forward to tackling more challenging cases, working with other intelligent individuals, and having support staff.

The position started off well, and I enjoyed my work. My coworkers were great, my boss made me feel appreciated, and I enjoyed the downtown law atmosphere. Plus, I was learning about so many areas of immigration law that I had never practiced before. I got to spend a lot of time in court, which was a big change from the transactional cases my former boss took. I worked on many different types of humanitarian immigration cases, all of which were new to me. Sometimes, I even found myself running across town to stop ICE from wrongly deporting a client. This was the reason I had gone to law school, and I was loving it.

But about six months after starting, I began to notice some negative changes in the workplace. My boss hired a managing attorney who made me feel micromanaged, requiring me to send her an update every day that outlined all the work I had done. A coworker and I worked out together during our lunch break about three days a week, and one day my boss sent us both a sharp email saying we were no longer allowed to do this. I distinctly remember crying in frustration during one of my annual reviews, and my boss responded, "Don't worry, everyone cries in their review." Even writing that I cried during a review is embarrassing, but to my boss, it was a normal part of the job.

Now that I own a firm and manage staff, I can see where my boss was coming from (except making staff cry in their review—I will never understand that), even though I choose to run my business differently. She was trying to run a business, was probably stressed about the firm finances, and thought that putting pressure on her employees would result in more efficient output and more revenue. I get it, but that environment wasn't healthy for me.

Although I enjoyed the work I was doing, I felt micromanaged and underappreciated, which dramatically lowered my morale and work ethic. I became snappy toward the managing attorney. I lost all drive to work on cases, and my efficiency levels plummeted. If I had an early-morning hearing, I would find an excuse to leave the office early that afternoon, and I spent more time on Facebook than actually working on cases. But I was completely broke, with most of my salary going to pay off my student loans, and I didn't think I had many other options.

In August 2014, my now husband and I decided to make a big change and move to Washington, DC. We had been talking about the move for a while, and I had submitted applications to government positions months before. I began applying for positions with law firms as well, sure I wasn't ready to start a firm myself. By mid-September, I had multiple phone interviews and even a few in-person interviews lined up, and by late September, I had multiple job offers. I turned them all down. I couldn't explain why, but none felt like they were the right fit.

I arrived in Washington, DC, on October 1, 2014, excited. I was sure I would find a job that was the right fit, convinced I wasn't ready to start my own practice. I kept applying for positions in firms and in the government, and again nothing felt quite right. In the meantime, I volunteered at a local nonprofit that handled immigration cases, and I attended networking events and had lots of coffee dates with local immigration attorneys. I was determined to find a good associate position and was pushing hard to get one.

Then, one day, a contact reached out looking for an immigration attorney for a client of hers in Washington, DC. I was not set up to take cases on my own. I did not have a business name, let alone an email address, phone number, or office space where I could meet clients. I hesitated for only a second before responding that I would be happy to take the case.

After accepting the case, I decided to make myself look like a legitimate law firm (we'll talk about how to do this later in the book), and I came up with a name for my firm, got a firm phone number, and reached out to contacts to find a location for an office space. I also researched options for malpractice insurance, refusing to risk liability even for one case. I kept telling myself I would only take on cases while I continued looking for a job at a firm, just to make a little extra cash, and I made sure to keep my costs low.

That first case changed me. There was something magical about working on the case myself, with nobody telling me what to do. After months of feeling micromanaged and underappreciated in a law firm, I was finally liberated. I could handle the case how I wanted. I could come and go as I pleased. Even better, I got to keep the legal fees I earned! I was hooked. I finally got an offer from the firm I had been waiting on, the one I knew would be the right fit, but I was already so in love with having my own practice that I turned it down.

When I started my law firm, I didn't have any money to invest into it. I had just moved across the country and was planning a wedding. Plus, I was still making payments on my student loans. So I knew that if I was going to start my own firm, I had to do it as inexpensively as possible.

I decided that I would never spend more in a month than I earned. I literally started my firm with \$0 and invested in it as my clients paid me. Liability insurance? That came as soon as my first client paid her deposit. Business cards? Got those after the first invoice payment. As I got more clients, I was able to invest a little more into the firm, and combined with using free services and carefully managing my expenses, I even started to pay myself. In the first two years of my firm, I never spent more than I earned in a given month.

Now, five years later, my practice is thriving. I easily pay myself six figures per year, and I'm working toward my new, seven-figure goal. I have a small staff who do most of the legal work for me, so I can focus on growing the business. I have won awards for my work as an attorney and have been asked to speak at major conferences. I do the things I want to do and typically work fewer than 30 hours per week in my firm. It all started with the first steps I took to start my firm while completely broke, living in a new city.

Do you want a high, stable salary? What about job flexibility and fewer hours in the office? Do you hope to become well known in your practice area and attract lots of new clients? Well, you could have all of that, with little to no investment. My story is not a fluke. I just did it the hard way, without a clear guide of how to do it. I figured it out along the way and made plenty of mistakes throughout the process. However, my success is based on specific, replicable steps that will help you grow your business, attract clients, and make money with practically no risk. It can work for any attorney willing to put in the work to create a solid, low-cost foundation for his or her firm.

In this book, I will teach you exactly how I started a law firm with no money. I will give you ideas for cheap and free technology solutions for running a practice. I will show you how to get your business started by using online resources, the skills of friends and family, and your own hard work. I will explain all of the business concepts and requirements you need to know to ensure you not only comply with the law, but also run your business effectively. I will outline how to market your business for free to attract a ton of new clients. Most importantly, I will give you the foundation for a successful business that you can grow and mold into your perfect career.

This is your guide to starting a law firm from scratch. Read it, highlight it, dog-ear it, and refer to it often. And, most importantly, take action.