

SAILING SOLO



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Ten Days of Chaos After Starting My Solo Law Practice

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On Thursday, May 8, 2025, I launched my solo practice. While I loved being part of a law firm, I longed to execute on my vision to create a high-touch, white-glove service at a fair price point for California small businesses while developing a culture that's focused on empathy, flexibility, and autonomy. I strongly believed that I could provide high-end, valuable work for my clients without working 24/7 or charging excessive rates. As the owner of my own law firm, I would have control over the clients I chose to represent. My vision for practicing law was focused on both excellence and work-life balance—and the strong belief that you do not have to choose between the two.

My Sacrifices While Working at a Law Firm

My journey to a legal career was non-traditional. My husband served 32 years on active duty with the Navy. Because of our frequent moves, I spent the first several years of my law career taking bar exams. We arrived in San Diego in 2013, and I made the intentional decision to focus on my legal career. Military spouse attorneys often must choose between supporting their spouse's military career and maintaining

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their legal careers. Licensing burdens are only one part of the problem—finding jobs in new markets is also challenging. It is a rare law firm that is willing to hire an attorney who will most likely move in the next two years. Even then, most law firms do not offer the flexibility that military spouses, especially women, need. We are often the sole caretakers of our families while our spouses are deployed; even when a military servicemember is not deployed, the demands of the job result in a heavier burden on the spouse to manage the home and the family.

By making my career a priority and committing to long hours, I was successful at breaking into the San Diego tax law community and rose through the ranks at my law firm. This also meant, however, that we had to sacrifice staying together as a family—my husband moved away twice due to active-duty orders while I stayed behind. Over the years, I held onto my dream of eventually owning my own law practice and creating an environment where attorneys like me can thrive. It's not just military spouse attorneys who face challenges—any attorney who cares for a family or has obligations that go beyond his or her nine-to-five job struggles in traditional law firms. These attorneys may need flexibility in their work environment, but they offer the same intelligent and excellent work product as other attorneys, and the challenges they have had to overcome give them additional strengths, such as compassion, efficiency, and loyalty.

Newly Solo, Facing Chaos

My decision to launch a solo practice did not come easy, though. Along the way, I received a lot of advice, some helpful and some not as helpful. A lot of well-meaning mentors tried to dissuade me by pointing out the difficulties and challenges involved with being both a business owner and a lawyer. While solo practice is not for everybody, it was the right move for me. While it was—and is!—a lot of work, I equate it to finally having my own baby after babysitting someone else's kid for several years: There were a lot of sleepless nights in the beginning, and the firm is still colicky, but I love it. It's mine, and it reflects my vision of what practicing law should be.

I affectionately refer to my first two weeks as a solo practitioner as “ten days of chaos.” One of my first tasks was getting engagement agreements for the clients who were transitioning to my firm. Before I could do this, I needed a template for an engagement agreement, and even before I could do that, I needed letterhead! It took four hours to draft my first engagement agreement. I followed that same pattern for every single thing I had to do during those first ten days: I needed to do A, but before I could do that, I needed to get B completed, but that required C to be done, and for that I needed to have A done. It was maddening! I kept my head down and did the best I could every day. By the 11th day, I finally reached a point of calm. I had enough of the basics done to make it possible to actually complete a task within a reasonable amount of time.

This turned out to be the eye of the storm. Memorial Day tends to be a slow period in tax controversy work; lots of government agents are taking time off, and clients are focused on graduations, anniversaries, and everything else besides dealing with an IRS notice. I remember almost being worried that work would slow down and I wouldn't have enough new cases in the pipeline to stay busy. Fortunately, I signed up for way too many speaking and writing engagements, so I kept busy. By the first week of July, I was feeling a little overwhelmed. I signed four new clients in that week, with one new client signing on each week thereafter, and even more referrals coming in. It's not exactly chaos these days, but it's a lot busier than I expected!

Lessons from My Transition to Solo Practice

During my transition, there were several things I did right, several things I did wrong, and some important lessons I learned along the way. I am grateful for the pre-work I invested in: The branding I created ten

years previously still reflected my values and aesthetics, and the domains I purchased several years earlier made it easy to get the website launched within a reasonable time. The years of investment in the San Diego legal community and building my reputation also paid off, as I had several clients that I originated and who would be coming with me, so I had a semblance of guaranteed income as I started out. I am also proud of how I managed the transition from my prior law firm. California law provides that clients choose their attorney, and most separating lawyers are instructed to provide three options: continue with the separating attorney, continue with the current firm, or find a new attorney. I made the choice to solicit only my originations, and as other clients approached me, I worked with my former partner on messaging to ensure the clients were cared for appropriately. When the dust settled, several of my clients decided to stay with my former firm, and several firm clients decided to transfer with me.

In hindsight, I wish I had launched my phone service and started working on my website and letterhead much earlier. I also regret spending so much time testing out different practice management systems and legal research engines; while it was nice to evaluate options before locking myself into a one-year (or longer) contract, it took up valuable time, and I ended up using mostly the same systems that I was familiar with from my previous firm. Finally, I wish I had taken time off between leaving my firm and officially launching my practice. I believed I did not have that luxury because I already had clients, but in hindsight, it would have been feasible.

My advice for others contemplating the leap to a solo practice is to truly understand why you want to take this step. When you can clearly articulate your personal and professional values and see where there is an irreconcilable gap between your current work environment and those values, it will be significantly easier to weather the storm of work and uncertainty that comes with being a solo. In addition, I learned that there is plenty of time to get everything done, so long as you are working on the right tasks in the right order. Focus on what will generate revenue and is required to maintain compliance with the state bar. Everything else will either get done in time or was not important to begin with. Finally, do not be afraid to make investments in technology or services that will save time: Bringing on a bookkeeper, hiring a legal assistant, or contracting with other solo attorneys to provide support during busy periods can mean the difference between surviving and thriving as a solo practitioner.

Sally Reddy, JD, LLM, specializes in tax dispute resolutions and represents businesses and individuals in IRS, FTB, EDD, and CDTFA tax audits and collections. She obtained her juris doctor degree from the University of Memphis School of Law and her master of laws degree in taxation from New York University. She is a California Certified Tax Law Specialist.