

For Solo Practitioners and Small Firms Sometimes the Best Office is No Office

By *Otto Beatty, III*

Solo and small firm attorneys are often looking to keep their overhead down. One of the ways this can be accomplished is by working primarily from home and utilizing the services and benefits of a virtual office facility. Virtual offices afford attorneys the ability to work from anywhere they choose, while enabling them to establish a professional presence and a place to meet clients in a conveniently-accessible office atmosphere on an as needed basis. The virtual office also serves as their professional address that can be marketed and a place where they can receive their professional mail and have clients drop off documents.

Virtual office facilities are located in most of the Columbus commercial business districts – Dublin, Polaris, Downtown, Easton and New Albany.

Virtual Office vs. Shared Office Arrangements?

A virtual office is different from an office sharing arrangement. Most virtual office facilities provide mailbox/address services and on-demand office space to businesses. Unlike a shared office facility or an executive suite, offices and conference rooms are rented by the hour, half-day, or by the day; as opposed to monthly or annually. The attorney does not have a dedicated office or the fixed cost of one. This is a cost-effective option if you only meet with clients in person a few times a month.

The “per use” or “pay as you go” model of virtual office facilities is attractive because you only pay for office space when you are actually using it. If the attorney only uses the virtual office when he or she is billing time or charging a fee, then the hourly rental cost or office use bundle easily pays for itself. Even if a shared or single rental office only costs a few hundred dollars a month, it still may not pay for itself every month. Finally, virtual office facilities have staff and other technological resources designed to support small businesses and mobile professionals.

Virtual Office vs. Traditional Full-time Office Lease?

For most solo practitioners, working from home and utilizing a virtual office is a better choice than entering into a commercial office lease. Most landlords require a five year commitment. Most virtual office facilities require a commitment of less than a year, thereby providing the practice with more flexibility.

The financial investment and commitment involved in a traditional office far exceeds the lease. Utilities, office equipment, furniture, phone service and Internet service are just a few expenses that one has to incur in establishing a traditional office outside of their home. Working primarily at home and strategically using a virtual office allows one to eliminate or avoid duplicating these expenses.

Professional Image and Marketing

Many attorneys worry that not having a full-time office will compromise their image and be unattractive to clients. In addition to the ethical concerns, most clients prefer to meet with a lawyer in a private office or conference room in a professional environment. Most attorneys prefer not to have clients meet at their personal home. The virtual office addresses both of the concerns of clients and attorneys.

Furthermore, a virtual office can enhance your personal image by allowing you to establish a professional presence in a prestigious location such as Easton or Dublin without paying pricy rent in these areas. While most lawyers are not required to have an office near the courthouse or in a particular neighborhood, certain addresses or areas may be more appealing to certain prospective and current clients. Many out-of-town firms have used virtual offices to open a branch office in Columbus. Other attorneys utilize virtual offices to have multiple offices throughout Columbus both for meeting and marketing purposes. Depending on the location of the facility, the virtual address can also increase your law practice’s search engine ranking for those searching for lawyers online.

Many virtual office facilities are staffed, thereby allowing the practice to have a full-time front desk without a full-time office. Attorneys can have their clients drop off documents and payments to a reliable and professional person. When clients visit the office, they are greeted and offered refreshments, giving the same professional feel as a larger firm.

Most importantly, the attorney who minimizes his or her expenses by utilizing a virtual office can devote more resources towards other marketing and technological solutions to maintain and grow his or her practice. Many attorneys utilizing virtual office space have asserted that their clients actually admire that their fees are not being invested in a fancy office and furniture.

In sum, many solo practitioners and small firms have found that a virtual office combined with a home office can be a cost-effective way to reduce overhead expenses while maintaining a professional presence. This trend will continue to grow as more attorneys discover this workplace innovation.



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