

LAW WEEK COLORADO

Startup Offers Big Law Benefits To Solos

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IT'S A DILEMMA that's troubled attorneys for as long as firms have existed — practice alone or join a group?

Attorneys who practice in large law firms — the type that employ administrative staff, marketing departments and IT technicians — benefit from a wide network of support that allows them to focus on their individual practice and book of business. They also benefit from the human capital a firm provides, the ability to walk down the hall and bounce an idea off of a colleague or to ask a mentor how he or she dealt with a particular issue.

Attorneys at big law firms don't worry about collections, fighting a computer virus or thinking about the myriad issues that plague sole and small practitioners. And few are the days when a client's problem is outside the expertise of a circle of colleagues.

Yet those in large firms face their own problems with office politics, billable hours and partnership. Sole and small-firm practitioners call their own hours, choose their own clients and set their own agendas.

A new startup in Denver, LawBank, aims to maximize the best of both by allowing sole and small-firm practitioners to capitalize on the benefits of firm life while allowing them to focus on their individual practices.

It's a project that was years in the making. Jay Kamlet, managing partner of the Denver office of Lathrop & Gage, had some notion for the concept when he launched his own firm more than a decade ago. It didn't begin to take shape however, until a few years ago when Kamlet started thinking about how the economy might be affecting attorneys in different types of practices.

"The impact of mergers and larger law firms reconsidering partnership causes you to wonder where these people who are fantastic practitioners end up," Kamlet said.

Gone are the days when partners pack up shop, cross the street and re-open for business. Recent articles in *The Wall Street Journal* and *Business Insider* have reported partner layoffs at firms in larger markets like New York City and Chicago. Practitioners, it seems, may have better odds launching their own practices than rejoining a firm facing similar issues as the one they left.

So in 2010, he approached Rob Fogler, a former law partner. "I called Rob to ask 'What do you think about creating a space just for lawyers?'" Kamlet said.

The original idea was to create an executive suite for lawyers. But as both began to research, they started talking about a different model — a shared, collaborative space, which offered some of the traditional benefits of working in a firm, like human capital, while providing the best benefits of sole practice.

It's a concept familiar to a new generation of small businesses: a shared working environment where those leasing space are



Left to right, Rob Fogler, Jay Kamlet and Jordan Deifik in front of the mural featured in LawBank's cafe. LawBank is a co-working space at South Colorado Boulevard and I-25.

often not employed by the same organization. Yet coworking is a concept the legal industry has been slow to explore until now.

"There are tons of great lawyers who don't know how to start their own firm," Kamlet said. That's where LawBank enters the equation.

"What we've developed, through collaboration, is a solution that provides a personal workspace for people and a dynamic opportunity where you have practitioners of different areas and skill levels working together while also allowing them to work alone," Kamlet said. "If you put them all in the same space, there is an opportunity to have them collaborate."

It's ideal for attorneys interested in the synergy that can occur when working with similar-minded people in the same space.

If you build it

Starting in 2010, Kamlet, who is chairman of LawBank, brought Fogler and Jordan Deifik onboard to develop his idea so he could maintain his practice with Lathrop & Gage.

Kamlet and Fogler have been good friends for more than a decade; they used to practice together at Kamlet Reichert. Fogler, who is LawBank's president, left the practice of law nearly 10 years ago to pursue entrepreneurial efforts. And it seemed like a good next step in his career when Kamlet approached him with his idea.

Fogler sees relationships and can help orchestrate the roster of attorneys in the space. And what Fogler does in relationships, Deifik does in logistics. Deifik, a family friend of Kamlet's, has experience in real estate and operations and will facilitate some of the

day-to-day logistics.

Ten full-sized offices for more experienced attorneys line the exterior of the space. And there is room for 20 to 30 attorneys with less experience who work more comfortably in a collaborative or open environment.

And there are different pricing models for each type of workspace. Desks in the open environment are on a first-come, first-serve basis and are a three-month minimum commitment. Cubicles are more exclusive — they come with a six-month lease, while leasing an office space comes in year-long terms.

Each lease comes with an allowance for wireless Internet, copying, long distance minutes, conference room usage, administrative assistance with scheduling and ordering supplies and access to a shared break room.

Three attorneys have signed on at the senior practitioner level, and two have signed up for the co-working space. When LawBank launched on Feb. 1, 10 recent graduates had leased desks in the co-working space.

Six of those desks were filled by recent University of Denver Sturm College of Law graduates. The school, which has agreed to a strategic alliance with the organization, is funding four of those spots.

Fogler's goal is trying to balance how many people are in the various spaces so that the senior practitioners have a deep enough pool to work with and the less experienced attorneys have enough advisers to seek out.

And within that group of attorneys, Fogler hopes to establish both horizontal and vertical diversity. Horizontal diversity is depth across practice areas, while vertical diversity would

be a range of experiences. "We're hoping to have both cross-generational and cross-practice area mentorship," he said.

It gives recent graduates the potential to get exposure to a depth of practice areas they may not see otherwise, Deifik said. And more experienced attorneys have access to attorneys they can offer to their clients at a lower rate.

"We think the experienced people will maintain their offices for longer periods of time," Kamlet said, "but the folks in the collaborative space may transition in and out more frequently — they may be looking for permanent positions with firms or moving in some other way to fulfill their career goals."

Additionally, there are spaces throughout the office for private meetings or confidential conversations. The space was crafted to minimize sound between the offices, a feature that helps attorneys protect their relationships with clients. An attorney may be in one of the office's private cubicles on the phone with his client and someone standing outside the door would not be able to hear his conversation.

It's each practitioner's responsibility to maintain their ethical requirements, Deifik said, though LawBank will work to provide continuing legal education courses on a regular basis.

The end goal of LawBank is to help lawyers focus on what they do best — the practice of law. And to help sole and small-firm practitioners do so with the best parts of big law firm culture — the open, collaborative exchanges that take place.

"If you aren't able to exchange with people, you're missing out on some level," Kamlet said. •

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