



THE ELUSIVE DREAM OF THE VIRTUAL LAW OFFICE

How would you like to practice law from home, in your pajamas, on your own schedule, and make a ton of money? Sounds good, doesn't it?

Lots of people are talking about virtual law offices these days. Bar publications, CLE courses, blogs, Twitter, and LinkedIn are full of articles jammed with technical terms like cloud computing, software as a service (SAAS), and data encryption. Read much of this stuff, and you get the impression that all you need to profit online is a secure client portal.

I am a big fan of technology (I would say "geek," but everyone who can turn on a computer and install Wordpress calls themselves that these days). I believe that the internet age has permanently changed the way law is practiced. The decomposition of the traditional value chain in legal services, coupled with disintermediation of the supply chain, has created all sorts of new ways for attorneys (and non-attorneys) to add value. **But it is a mistake to focus on the technology itself as the value add.**

When I was first thinking of adding a virtual component to my law firm, I reviewed all of the blog posts on one of the more popular virtual law office platforms. The blog had a post for each firm that signed up for the platform (these blog posts appear to have been removed in mid-2011). When I went back to review the websites of each of these hopeful new virtual law firms, *a surprising number had gone out of business*. That tells me that not enough attorneys are looking before they leap. So, at the risk of stating the obvious, I would like to offer a few humble suggestions for those who are considering virtual law practice.

Your Virtual Law Office Will Not Succeed if You Don't Drive Traffic to Your Website

The simple but often-overlooked truth is that your virtual law office will not succeed if you do not drive traffic to your website. Period. Virtual law office technology will help you communicate securely with your clients. It may even come with a basic website. But neither of these things will get you clients. If you want to attract new clients over the internet, you need to be visible in search and know how to convert viewers into customers.

[Richard Granat](#) is (along with Stephanie Kimbro) one of the top thought leaders in this field. Here's a quote from his excellent white paper on [virtual law office success factors](#):

If [your law firm website] is not findable in the search engines you don't generate prospects or leads, and without prospects you can't get conversions to sales or clients, and therefore no new revenues. Many law firm [websites] are poorly designed and don't contain the elements that will make them findable. They are not incorporating the correct keywords on the pages of the site or the site is not sufficiently focused to get search engine recognition ... Don't even think about adding a virtual law firm component until you fix your front-end web site.

I would add that being “findable in the search engines” is not enough. The web is littered with well-written, aesthetically pleasing sites that *the search engines* can find and index. But because *potential clients* can't find them, they provide little benefit to the law firm. They are like stunning billboards in the desert. No one sees them. Many attorneys have websites; few have websites that generate business.

Attorney Rania Combs is one attorney who is doing this right. Her law firm is completely web-based and [her site](#) ranks well for keywords related to her practice. Although she practices Texas law, she lives in North Carolina. In an [interview with the Texas bar](#), she gave this for advice to attorneys who want to introduce a virtual element into their practice:

You're going to have to find a way to drive clients to your website. Just like building a traditional brick-and-mortar firm, building a web-based law firm takes time, patience, and hard work. It won't happen overnight.

If you are thinking of a virtual or mixed practice, don't add the virtual component until your website has proven that it will generate leads. Instead, [start a blog](#) that focuses on your ideal client's needs. [Do some keyword research](#). Write [content that people will read](#). Build a few [links](#). Get those leads coming in. Ensure the demand before you create the supply.

Your Virtual Law Office Will Not Succeed if You Aren't Meeting the Needs of Your Target Market

I believe that many virtual law firms fail because attorneys are too focused on themselves instead of their clients. The virtual law office model does have some client benefits (such as being able to handle legal matters without the hassle of appointments), but that isn't what lures most attorneys. Most people who launch a virtual firm are thinking more about their own convenience.

In my practice, I used technology to supplement—but not to replace—my traditional, bricks-and-mortar office. When a client needed a face-to-face meeting, they got it.

Attorney Jay Fleishman uses a similar model for his New York bankruptcy practice. In a [controversial post](#), he questions the viability of the virtual law office model:

Those who offer the virtual law firm are selling something most people don't want. People want to be able to make a personal connection with other people, to build trust in a lawyer's expertise. They don't want to be met with a password-encrypted firewall and triple-redundant backup systems.

I'm sure that Fleischman is intentionally overstating his case (Fleishman is a sharp marketer who understands that controversial posts can be great linkbait). If there wasn't a demand, people like Rania Combs and Stephanie Kimbro wouldn't be able to support a virtual practice. But his basic point is well-taken. Any attorney who is considering a virtual law office should take a clear-eyed look at the demand for his services.

In other words, forget about working in your jammy jams. [Focus on your client's needs](#) instead of your convenience. These two things don't have to be mutually exclusive, but they often are. If you are an elder law attorney serving mostly octogenarians, don't expect them to be wild about your new secure client portal. They are from a generation that needs expects face-to-face contact. You need to either give it to them or switch to a different practice area.

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