

COLUMBUS BUSINESS FIRST

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Attorneys say virtual law firms allow them to bill fewer hours, cut costs

Business First of Columbus - by [Will Boye](#) For Business First

After three stops, Gideon Moore decided to leave traditional law firms behind and join the virtual legal sector.

Moore, a corporate lawyer, started his career with a huge New York firm, **Cadwalader Wickersham & Taft**, and then jumped to increasingly smaller firms based in Atlanta and Charlotte.

But he never found the right fit. He also wasn't interested in starting a solo practice.

So he joined a "virtual law firm" called FSB FisherBroyles last year, and he feels very much at home – literally. During the work week, Moore spends a good deal of his time working from his house in Matthews, N.C.

FSB got started in Atlanta, but all 56 of its lawyers are responsible for their own office space, whether that's at home or elsewhere. Without the overhead expense, the firm can afford to offer clients much lower billing rates, and its partners get to keep 85 percent of the work they bring in and complete.

For lawyers such as Moore, that means they can bill fewer hours but make more money than at a traditional firm.

"I had to bill 160 hours per month, and now 80 hours per month is great, and that's generally what I'm doing," Moore said. "That gives me a chance to turn around and go out and spend more time with my clients and go see them where they are."

In Columbus, attorney Wilhelmina Washington started a virtual practice at **Ohiolawonline.com** in August 2009. It provides clients services over e-mail and the Internet to keep fees low and make counseling convenient.

"The advantage over traditional brick and mortar is that clients can request services from you 24 hours a day and you can respond 24 hours a day from any location," Washington said. "You are not tied to a desk or required to wear a suit every day. I have a BlackBerry and am able to access client requests from my phone and respond on the go."

Without office rental or employee expenses, Washington says she is able to offer clients fees at "document cost."

"I've received calls from lawyers in other states that are considering or have started virtual firms so they can provide more affordable services to clients and have more flexibility in their work schedules," she said. "There seems to be an increase in women lawyers opening virtual law firms so they can have more time to spend with their families."

Brian Davis had been with law firm **Alston & Bird** in Charlotte, N.C., for 11 years when he decided to make a change. Davis, a trademark lawyer, says as billing rates continued to rise at Alston, he grew disenchanted with the traditional business model.

"Most of my clients were not using the firm as a whole — they were just using me," he says. "I felt like I was at a competitive disadvantage with our rate structure."

In March, Davis joined Virtual Law Partners, an office-less firm based in Palo Alto, Calif., that has 32 lawyers.

With his billing rates dropping by a third, Davis said he has added clients who couldn't afford him before. And he also has picked up work through referrals from other partner attorneys around the

“I bill out at roughly the rate of a third-year associate at Alston & Bird,” said Davis.

FSB and Virtual Law Partners focus on hiring seasoned lawyers with experience at large law firms or corporate legal departments.

Virtual law firms aren't equipped for some practice areas that require a large number of associates, such as complex litigation.

But for many clients, it's a more affordable alternative to the traditional law firm.

With businesses still working to recover from the recession, nontraditional law firms that can offer legal services at discounted rates are finding a new audience, said John Lassiter, president of **Carolina Legal Staffing**.

“There's significant expense pressure on corporate legal departments to find ways to reduce costs,” he said. “Clearly at a time when everybody is managing their money aggressively, it opens up a wide variety of styles of practice or access to legal services that were probably unimaginable 15 years ago.”

So far, the virtual law firm model has moved slowly. FSB entered the market by hiring Moore and Ashley Tison, a real estate lawyer who started his career with McGuireWoods.

Tison said he works at office space he rents from an accounting firm in Eastover, N.C. He, Moore and Davis all said they hope to see their firms grow over time.

The only drawback to the virtual firm, Davis said, may be that it is much more of a solitary exercise than working at a traditional firm or within a corporate office legal environment.

“I would like to add some additional attorneys here locally just so I can see someone face to face on a more regular basis,” Davis said.

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