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Virtual office spaces are hitting their stride

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A few years ago, when the explosion of mobile devices made it practical to run a law practice from anywhere, the idea of virtual offices was a hot topic. While the discussion about virtual offices has died down from the initial period of curiosity, it seems to be an experiment that has worked — and solo attorneys are among the groups benefiting the most from the alternative work arrangement.

“We have about 1,100 members, and probably 30 percent of them are lawyers,” said Lori Spiess, owner and CEO of Virtual OffiCenters, which has five area locations. “We’ve had a lot of lawyers who were in a home office and were doing OK, but really thrived in a shared environment.”

Proponents of virtual office spaces say that the community aspect is often the biggest draw for their solo attorney clients. Kimberly M. Hanlon, an attorney and co-owner of MoreLaw Minneapolis, an executive office suite in downtown Minneapolis, said that her renters often find themselves sharing case advice and swapping referrals as a result of just spending time in the same space.

“I think it’s because we have something that looks and feels like a law firm, and not just a generic office,” said Hanlon. “Everything attorneys need, we’ve thought of.”

Most providers of virtual office services try to have unique offerings that will set them apart in a crowded market. MoreLaw’s space offers such pragmatic touches as a Bates stamper by each copier for lawyers who need to sequentially number exhibits — or Kleenex in every conference room for those unexpected moments when a client becomes emotional.

“They walk in with most everything they need as far as running their practice,” said Hanlon, who runs MoreLaw with her mother and law partner Sara Hanlon. “We try to offer



STAFF PHOTO: BILL KLOTZ

Virtual OffiCenters CEO Lori Spiess, left, and area manager Lisa Olsonoski stand in their center in the Park OffiCenter building in St Louis Park.

them a higher level of support in running their office. If a lawyer is on a deadline or is dealing with a stressful matter, it won’t work for them if they don’t have everything they need.”

VirtualOffiCenter encourages lawyers renting their spaces to develop seminars that might be pertinent to other members — and, not coincidentally, that might drum up business or even a new law partner for the lawyer.

“We have networking groups and a business-to-business directory,” said Spiess. “An environment like this can offer tons of opportunities to not only grow your business, but find business with other virtual office users.”

Home alone

Having a virtual office doesn’t necessarily mean renting a space because it has a conference room. According to White Bear Lake attorney Brodie Hacken, if you’re in the right practice area, a smartphone and access to a public place might be all you need.

“I do mostly 99 percent criminal defense, so most of the time I meet my clients at a neutral spot like a coffee house,” said Hacken.

That approach is not only less expensive, but also less formal, which can be key for a need-based representation area such as criminal defense. While Hacken first started operating that way out of necessity, he now appreciates not only having his overhead at a minimum, but also having the world as his office.

“You’re not always dealing with people who have a lot to spend on a lawyer,” he said. “They don’t want to see me with a bunch of expensive furniture and feel like they’re helping to pay for it.”

Hanlon said she often talks with solos who prefer working from home, and it’s something she would never try to talk them out of if it fits their practice. But for the right kind of attorney, a rented space can offer an economical way to lend credibility to a practice. Hanlon says that goes for everyone from newly minted lawyers to retired Minnesota Chief Magistrate Judge Arthur J. Boylan, who’s now a mediator and a MoreLaw client.

The cost of renting a virtual office can vary. Virtual OffiCenters members can pay as little as little as \$20 per hour for a meeting room. “The savings can be huge when you weigh it against renting office space,” said Spiess.

Hacken acknowledges that working virtually isn’t for every lawyer; a wills and trusts attorney, for instance, probably needs to establish a centralized, full-time base from which to do business.

“But the best way for me to stay competitive is to keep my costs down, and running my practice helps me do that while also making a living,” said Hacken. “It’s worked for me.”

