

Advice From Those Who Know Small Firms

By Thomas E. Rogers

STARTING A SOLO OR SMALL LAW FIRM IS A daunting task, and a combination of strategy and luck are needed for success. Margaret Klaw and Nicole D. Galli are two attorneys who took the entrepreneurial leap into small firm management. Klaw is a founding member of Berner Klaw & Watson LLP, an all-women-owned family law practice, and Galli is a commercial IP litigator who founded the Law Offices of N.D. Galli LLC after more than two decades of working in AmLaw100, boutique and regional firms. They spoke to the Solo, Small and Mid-Size Firm Management Committee on March 16.

A key to success in running a small firm is “owning” the business. Klaw joined forces with Joni Berner in 1991, not knowing what to expect, and found that she enjoyed it. The flexible hours were valuable and the benefit of management on her own terms was appealing. Galli, on the other hand, began her firm in 2015 deliberately to be her own boss. After working in large firms where decision-making power was often out-of-reach, she wanted to work in an environment where she had more control over her practice.

One challenge that comes with small-firm ownership is delegation of tasks. From marketing the practice to buying stamps, the onus is on you. In firms with a few attorneys, tasks can be delegated. “We all naturally find what we are interested in,” said Klaw. She gravitated toward marketing and developing her firm’s website.



Nicole D. Galli (center, left), Margaret Klaw (center) and Immediate Past Chancellor Gaetan J. Alfano, with Maureen M. Farrell, chair (right), and Laura E. Laughlin, program chair, Solo, Small & Mid-Size Firm Management Committee, at the Committee’s meeting on March 16.

Unpopular tasks, like personnel matters, are spread among the staff. A smaller firm, like Galli’s, needs a different approach. “The trick is to hire people to work for you who can do what you can’t,” she said.

Business development is a hands-on experience and requires time and effort to develop a book of business and keep the lights on. You never know where the next referral will come from. Klaw and her partners and associates are involved in the Philadelphia Bar Association and other activities for networking purposes. Galli

also focuses on keeping a broad network, but said “It can be a complete mystery some days” where doors will open.

Running a firm requires capital, and that capital must be invested appropriately based on the needs and client-base. However, a website will be where any prospect will make their first impression of the firm and its practice. Klaw suggested forming a relationship with a good web developer to come up with and maintain a unique brand. She and Galli agreed, though, that there is no need to break the bank.

All good things must come to an end, and solo and small firms need to also deal with succession planning. Smaller firms, however, offer their principals the luxury of maintaining greater control over the future of the business they built.

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