



## **CHECKLIST FOR SETTING UP A NEW LAW OFFICE**

The following is not intended to be a complete list of everything that can, or must, be done to establish a new law office. Instead, we hope to provide some ideas for your consideration, and we would like to hear your suggestions for improvements or things that we have overlooked. The Alabama State Bar offers member benefit discounts for many of the products and services you will need, and the Practice Management Assistance Program can help you set up many of the business and practice systems listed below. See [www.alabar.org](http://www.alabar.org).

### **THE VISION**

- Draft Firm Mission Statement
- Draft Firm Core Services Statement
- Draft Firm Target Market Statement
- Draft Firm Practice Ambiance Statement

### **THE BUSINESS PLAN & BUDGET**

- Draft Expenses Cash Flow Estimate
- Draft Revenue Cash Flow Estimate
- Draft Marketing Plan
- Draft Partnership, LLP, LLC, or Space Sharing Agreement
- Obtain necessary Internet, Facebook, Twitter, etc. domain names

### **THE OFFICE**

#### Location

- Is it convenient for those I am targeting as clients?
- Is it a reasonable commute for me?
- Is it close to the courthouse or other agency offices I frequent?
- Is it close to the law library or other research sites I use?
- Does it have a sufficient amount of parking for clients and staff?
- Is it reasonably convenient to public transportation?
- Is it in a good location to attract walk-in clients, if I want them?
- Is it close to other lawyers who may provide guidance or referrals?
- It is easy to find and easy to give directions to?
- Is there room for adequate signage?
- Is my bank reasonably convenient?
- Is the type of Internet access I want available from this location?

- Is mobile service adequate if I plan not to have a landline?
- Is it readily accessible to the clients I will target – including the disabled?
- Is the area well lit, safe, and accessible after regular business hours?
- Are restaurants and stores nearby?
- Is there adequate room for expansion as my practice grows?
- Does it create the image I want my practice to project?
- Does the price include cleaning service and utilities?
- Is the rent reasonable for the space and services provided?

### Configuration

- Are the offices for lawyers adequate?
- Is there sufficient space for support staff?
- Is there adequate and convenient storage space for office supplies and files?
- Is there a secure location for my fileserver and other communications equipment?
- Is it suitable for computer network wiring/wireless network installation without excessive expense?
- Is the reception area adequate and attractive?
- Will the design and construction ensure client privacy and confidentiality?
- Do I need a conference room/library?
- Is there room for a break area/kitchen?
- Does it have appropriate access and facilities for the elderly or handicapped if I expect them to be a substantial part of my clientele? Is it ADA compliant?
- Is there an area where children can play quietly, if necessary, while I meet with their parents?
- Is there adequate space for postage meter, copy machine, scanning station, and fax machine or other equipment I need?
- If utilities are included, will the heat/ac be on nights and weekends if I need to work then?
- Where is the thermostat located and who controls it, me or the landlord?
- Is the electrical system adequate and are there enough outlets?
- Where do additional outlets and phone jacks need to be?

## **FURNISHINGS**

### Furniture

- Does my desk accommodate the type of equipment I will be using?
- Does my secretary's desk accommodate the type of equipment she will be using?
- Are lawyer and assistant furnishings ergonomically designed and comfortable for use over long hours?
- Are additional stand-alone computer stations necessary?
- Do I have adequate seating in my office for clients?
- Does my secretary/legal assistant need at-desk seating for clients?
- How many people can I expect in the reception area at one time and what type of seating do I need?

- Are my furnishings suitable for the elderly and handicapped, if I expect them to be a substantial part of my clientele?
- How many people can I expect at depositions/conferences at one time and what type seating do I need?
- Are additional conference room furnishings necessary?
- Are wall hangings adequate and appropriate for the atmosphere I want to create?
- Do I have an adequate number of locking file cabinets or a file room that can be locked for secure in-office file storage for the next two years?
- Are work tables necessary for scanning, copying, brief binding, mail handling, etc?
- Do I need additional stands for scanner, fax machine, postage meter, etc?
- Do I have adequate reading materials in the reception area to keep clients occupied in the event of a delay, and will any of the materials I have displayed offend any of my clients?
- Do I have some picture books, coloring books, crayons, and small toys to keep children quietly occupied, if necessary, while I meet with their parents?

#### Office Equipment and Software

- Computers, laptops or tablets, one for each attorney and secretary/legal assistant
- Back-up System
- Word Processing
- Time and Billing
- Case Management/Docket Control
- General Ledger Accounting/Trust Accounting
- Payroll Management
- Conflict of Interest Check System
- Database or Contact Management Program
- Legal Research (*See Fastcase, Free Research Service for ASB members.*)
- Internet Access
- Spreadsheet Program
- Specialty Practice Software (Real Estate Closing, Bankruptcy, Estate Planning)
- Document Assembly Software
- Copier
- Telephone system/Cell Phones
- Fax Machine or Faxing Software/Online faxing account
- Scanner, personal or production & PDF creation software
- Portable tape or digital recorder
- Calculator
- Postage meter/mail scale or online postage system
- Binding machine
- Two- and three-hole punches
- Heavy duty stapler
- Shelving for storage areas

- Voicemail with Password to access

#### Office Supplies

- Stationery - Professional letterhead with matching second sheet and envelopes. (See Rule 7.5, Alabama Rules of Professional Conduct)
- Business cards (See rule 7.6, Alabama Rules of Professional Conduct)
- Enclosure cards
- Plain envelopes or pre-printed return envelopes
- Window envelopes (if your billing system can use them)
- Mailing labels
- Manila envelopes in various sizes
- File folders
- Copy paper and inexpensive plain paper for drafts
- Colored paper for memos, file opening sheets, etc.
- Miscellaneous paper clips, pens, pencils, and rubber bands
- Mailers for CD/DVDs
- Supplies for Federal Express, UPS, etc.

#### **OTHER MATTERS**

##### Licensure, Notifications & Insurance

- Make sure your occupational license is current. Special membership status does not permit you to engage in the active practice of law. Upgrade the status of your license if necessary.
- Notify the Alabama State Bar and your local bar association in writing of your new address. Notifications to the Alabama State Bar should be sent to the attention of "Membership" and can be sent by e-mail to [ms@alabar.org](mailto:ms@alabar.org), or mailed to:

Alabama State Bar  
Attn.: Membership  
P. O. Box 671  
Montgomery, Alabama 36101-0671

- Ask that your new firm information be published in the "About Members, Among Firms" feature of the Alabama Lawyer. Send information to [margaret.murphy@alabar.org](mailto:margaret.murphy@alabar.org). Ask your local bar regarding similar published features.
- Obtain any necessary city occupational license for your new office.
- Obtain malpractice coverage. Professional liability coverage is not required to practice law in Alabama, but it is highly recommended and it is required if you

wish to participate in the ASB Lawyer Referral Service. The Practice Management Assistance Program maintains a list of known providers.

- Make sure you have adequate hazard insurance coverage for the contents of your new office, including any necessary coverage for business interruption and destruction of papers and files. Also check on liability coverage for accidents which may occur in your office, and consider the purchase of disability coverage.
- Notify the post office of your new address.
- Send change of address cards to your bank and all publications to which you subscribe.
- Open accounts/change address with UPS, FedEx, etc. (See UPS discount benefit for ASB members.)
- Determine whether you will need worker's compensation insurance and, if necessary, obtain it. (See §25-5-1. et seq., Code of Alabama, 1975, as amended.)
- Post all notices to employees required by Federal or State law

#### Office Systems

- Office Policies & Procedures Manual
- Administrative Policies & Procedures
- Job Descriptions
- Salaries & Benefits
- Confidentiality Policy
- Hiring Policies (recruiting, interviewing, negotiating, etc.)
- Orientation & Training Policies
- Payroll Policies & System
- Mail, fax and delivery handling system
- Phone message system
- Complete Computer Backup System
- Policies & Procedures for handling a matter
- Client Intake Form
- Conflict of Interest System (incorporate data from previous practice or employment)
- File Opening System
- Filing System
- Client Index/Database System
- Calendaring System & Backup Procedures
- Statute of Limitations System
- Accounting, Timekeeping & Billing System
- Trust Accounting Procedures

- Client Relations Policies & Procedures
- Policies for Communicating Fees and Deadlines
- Engagement, non-engagement and disengagement letters
- File Retention Policy for copies to client and release of file at end of matter (See Formal Opinion 2010-02)
- Phone call return policy
- Checklists for all substantive law areas
- Fee schedule for all substantive law areas

### Financial Systems

- Open new firm account, and select accounting or check book software which will balance the account and prepare income, expense and other financial reports.
- Open new IOLTA trust account(s). (If you are planning to handle real estate matters, it is a good idea to have one account for that and another for general matters. Effective as of January 1, 2008 IOLTA accounts became mandatory. See Rule 1.15, Alabama Rules of Professional Conduct.)

### Marketing

- Compile a mailing list and send announcements of your new office/address to other attorneys and prior and potential clients. (See ARCP Rules 7.1 – 7.6 on Information about Legal Services.)
- Yellow pages, web site, Facebook, Twitter and other advertisements (Remember that the advertising rules in the ARCP apply to social media used to promote your practice, too!)
- Notify your state and federal court judges of your availability for appointed indigent defense work, guardian ad litem work, etc.

### Last Minute Details

- Use any “down” time to familiarize yourself with all the features of the telephone system, computer hardware and software, and other new systems you will be using.
- Contact the Alabama State Bar Association’s Practice Management Assistance Program (PMAP) at (334) 517-2120 if you need further assistance in setting up or managing your office, or have any questions regarding technology or software. We may not have all the answers, but we can usually put you in touch with someone who does.