



JANET ADAMS | BUSINESS FIRST

Bradley Koffel runs a five-attorney law firm in Columbus that is structured informally so clients can schedule meetings around the clock using text or e-mail.

## Law firm entrepreneurs content to maintain small office footprints

BY JAN O'DANIEL | FOR BUSINESS FIRST

Words like “nimble,” “creative” and “boutique” are germane to so-called glamorous professions like marketing, advertising and public relations.

But law?

Absolutely, say those in single-office private practice.

In fact, those very adjectives that attract – and keep – attorneys such as Bradley Koffel from even thinking about joining larger, multi-office firms, sometimes known as “biglaw.”

“It’s a lot like being a restaurateur who resists the temptation to franchise,” said the 42-year-old criminal attorney. “People have a deeper appreciation for it. Like Tony’s (restaurant) in German Village. People always know Tony will be there and that Tony knows what’s going on.”

That’s exactly how Koffel runs the Koffel Law Firm, which he launched six months after graduating law school.

While he does admit to starting his own practice partly as a function of the times – the 1990s brought a glut of lawyers and little hiring – he has never regretted the decision to be a small, one-office shop with just five attorneys.

These one-office shops are content not to compete with big law firms, say the economy is helping, not hurting their businesses – their fees aren’t as big as the big boys’ and cases such as bankruptcy have increased – and they rely on partnerships with other small firms to keep business coming through their doors.

Those that run practices also are in charge of their own destiny. That might seem appealing these days as larger firms trim payroll.

According to the National Law Journal, the top 250 law firms in the U.S. cut 1,400 lawyer positions this year, with associates hit hardest.

The head count at the top 250 law firms has dropped two years in a row, the publication reported. Last year the overall decline was 4 percent, and this year it was 1.1 percent.

### BEING BOSS

Now with five attorneys, three support staff, and a recent move to new office space on Watermark Drive, Koffel is content to

enjoy both the autonomy and direct client contact that comes from working without a managing partner or intermediary.

“Everyone is here because they like the lifestyle,” he said. “There’s no one looking over our shoulder. And, as much as possible, we make the delivery of legal services efficient and succinct. A larger firm might require the client to work through a

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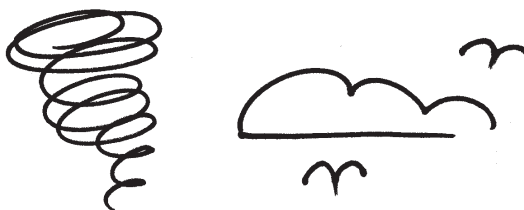
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Thomas Taneff has created practice areas such as adoption that aren't commonplace at larger firms.

## FIRMS: *Autonomy a powerful lure*

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receptionist or a paralegal or wait for call-backs."

For Koffel, it's almost a badge of honor that his clients don't need to schedule meetings in advance. Instead they just call, text or e-mail, seven days a week.

"We have competition, of course, but we try to differentiate ourselves in what we do versus the typical law firm," he said. "We have no secretaries, no Dictaphones, use very little letterhead and little postage. We work on a relatively small platform in terms of office space. Our purpose is well understood - we're here to serve clients and the better we do it, the more profits will follow."

In addition to not being at the mercy

of corporate belt tightening, lawyers who open their own practices say flexibility is a benefit. Eleanor Beavers Haynes, 53, has continued her practice even after losing husband and partner Douglas Haynes to leukemia in 2008.

As the managing member of Haynes & Haynes, a firm specializing in bankruptcy law, she's able to make a good living and raise two children, ages 13 and 11.

Initially, though, Haynes sought small-practice law because of the opportunities it afforded her as an African-American woman.

"When I graduated from law school in 1984, women were 30 percent of the graduating class," she said. "The likelihood of getting in with a larger firm was slim to none."

Though she and her husband both worked for other companies before opening the practice in 1992, she said he always earned more money than her simply because he was a man.

"As a woman, if I were in a larger-firm environment, I would not have the kind of independence and respect for the knowledge and skills I have in a field dominated by men," she said.

Like Koffel, Haynes appreciates the tremendous flexibility and autonomy afforded in her one-office, three attorney practice.

"I make decisions, and I make them right now. There's no waiting for a corporate board to say 'yes' or 'no,'" she said. "Besides, I'm too smart-mouthed to work for someone else. My clients like that about me. It works well in the business world, but not the partnership world."

Being boss is also what Thomas Taneff likes about his 18-year-old, one-office practice that has four attorneys.

Taneff, principal of the Law Offices of Thomas Taneff, specializes in probate, estate planning and adoption.

"Most of the larger firms don't practice in the area of adoption," he said. "They might have estate planning, but their cost to do something is much higher. I'll get a referral from them saying, 'It's too small for us,' and there are small firms that do probate, small firms that do adoption, but not a lot that do both."

### LIKE FAMILY

Mark Kitrick, 55, senior partner of Kitrick Lewis & Harris, a four-attorney personal injury and consumer protection firm, has two rules for his one-office practice: Never put a desk between him and his client and never take a fee higher than what the client will get.

"We've purposely kept our office small so we can know each other, work together, and share ideas and philosophies. And with today's technology, e-mail and Skype, we actually have more contact with our clients."

Kitrick's firm is representing the family of Michelle Kazlauskis, the Pelotonia bicyclist killed last summer.

"We're passionate about what's going on with our clients and we make sure we call them before they call us. An informed client is the best client," he said. "Besides, I always think about how I would I want my mom or sister or dad to be treated."

JAN O'DANIEL is a freelance writer.

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