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## Going solo and building a practice in the Big Apple

Attorneys follow varying paths to solo practice. Some work on their own after law school, while others leave firms, and still others depart from public- or private-sector employment. But few have followed the course taken by attorney David E. Miller, a newly minted solo whose prior legal career has reached across the world and back.

I met Miller several years ago, when he worked for a multi-national financial institution. Recently, Miller decided to forgo the corporate lifestyle and hang out his own shingle. I asked him to discuss the hows and whys of starting a solo practice on the East Coast.

### The upper echelons of international law and corporate practice

Partly due to an upbringing in a university town by his professor-father, Miller developed far-flung interests in history, language and travel at an early age. He spent time after high school at a kibbutz in Israel, and already fluent in French, he went on to major in Russian studies, then obtained his master's degree in Russian history.

Recognizing there were few opportunities in academia, Miller landed a paralegal job at an immigration law firm, where he decided to pursue the law. As a law student, Miller spent a summer working on minority property rights in the Deep South. He subsequently accepted a dream job as a first-year associate with the Moscow office of the prestigious global law firm of Hogan & Hartson.

Miller worked overseas on weighty litigation matters across Europe and even represented a Hollywood studio filming a major motion picture in Russia.

On his return to the States, Miller continued his international law practice, then worked in-house at a major financial institution, where he managed as many as 300 litigated matters at a time.

The big-firm-corporate lifestyle took its toll. With routine and endless 12-hour workdays, Miller found less and less time for his wife and two young children. Something needed to change.

### Building a solo firm on a budget

Miller left his in-house position and returned to private practice at a boutique litigation firm but quickly turned to the idea of working for himself. With no clients of his own, a highly competitive legal marketplace and a family to support, Miller was concerned about taking the plunge. Parting with a steady paycheck was not an easy decision.

In the end, his entrepreneurial spirit carried the day.

I asked Miller how one goes about building a solo practice in the New York area, and his answer was simple — “carefully.”

*He loves the independence and flexibility afforded by self-employment, and the time he now spends with family is priceless.*

To conserve resources, Miller set up his office at his home, about 20 miles from the city. He emphasizes in-person client contact and frequently travels to meet his clients at their places of business. Miller sees little advantage in expending resources on a fancy office when he can meet clients and take depositions at arranged locations.

The biggest surprise for Miller has been the amount of down

### SOLE SPEAK



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time spent on administrative functions. Transitioning to a one-man shop from a corporate environment where secretaries and paralegals allowed Miller to focus on his legal work and billable hours has taken some adjustment.

Miller recounts multiple trips to his local bank just to open his law firm accounts and says the nearest office supply store is his “home away from home.” He did not expect so many “behind the scenes” tasks.

Ultimately, Miller concludes, firm administration is a necessary investment, but you have to work as efficiently as possible to maximize your client time. Upgrade facilities as permitted by your budget. Realistic growth is the key.

### Getting and keeping core clients

Another significant challenge for Miller has been building his client base from scratch. Although he represented a steady stream of Fortune 500 companies in his former world, working on his own now requires that he find — and

keep — his own clients. Easier said than done, particularly in the hypercompetitive New York City market.

Building a client portfolio has been slow but steady, he says. There are no shortcuts, and the only way to succeed is to keep at it.

Miller uses modern marketing tools such as LinkedIn, but his best ally so far has been the telephone. Miller has marketed his firm by reaching out to former colleagues and business associates and letting them know what he brings to the table. The results have been tangible.

Miller's favorite new client story is based on a wrong number. One of his former employers intended to call a different David Miller but reached him by mistake. One thing led to another, a referral was made, and now Miller receives recurring litigation work from the new client.

Miller concedes his book of business is not where it needs to be but remains undeterred and takes comfort in the steady progress made over just a few months in solo practice. Although he takes on a variety of matters, Miller places a premium on including clients with repeat business. Continuity is paramount.

### Rewards over risks

Though his solo practice has hit bumps in the road, Miller has no regrets and looks forward to building his practice. He loves the independence and flexibility afforded by self-employment and the time he now spends with family is priceless.

And Miller confesses he likes the idea of living or dying by his own sword.

I had more questions, but Miller had to cut the interview short. He was off to buy some legal pads. Such is life at the Law Office of David E. Miller LLC.