



From beginners to BIGSHOTS

bizjournals
LIFE-NEWS-TRAVEL

sponsored by
MasterCard

SACRAMENTO BUSINESS JOURNAL
EL ORADDO PLACES SACRAMENTO YUBA

Members: [Log in](#)
Not Registered? [Register](#) for free extra services.

Subscribe Now

Get A Free Trial

Choose Another Market:
Sacramento

[HOME](#) | [ONLINE EDITION](#) | [PRINT EDITION](#) | [SUBSCRIBE](#) | [MARKETPLACE](#) | [BUSINESS RESOURCES](#) | [EVENTS](#) | [CAREERS](#) | [TRAVEL](#)

Search [GO](#) [Search Archive](#)

[News by Company](#) | [News by Industry](#) | [People in the News](#)

IN DEPTH:

[Sacramento](#) > [Print Edition](#) > [Industries](#) > [Business Services - Legal Services](#)

[Subscribe to Sacramento Business Journal](#)

Friday, May 23, 2008

Small practice, big business

Almost two-thirds of California lawyers strike out on their own, but going solo offers its share of risk

Sacramento Business Journal - by [Kathy Robertson](#) Staff writer

[Print Article](#) | [Email Article](#) | [Reprints](#) | [RSS Feeds](#) | [Add to Del.icio.us](#) | [Digg This](#)

Related News

[500 Capitol Mall signs McDonough](#)
[Sacramento]

[Green movement creates new legal opportunities](#)
[San Francisco]

[Businesses find entertainment is cheap ticket to impress clients](#)
[Sacramento]

[Firm drops high-rise for rail yard](#)
[Sacramento]

[Law firms woo, retain quality attorneys with part-time options](#)
[Sacramento]

The hours are flexible and change occurs by whim instead of committee in a solo or very small legal practice.

Law conducive to this kind of practice -- personal injury, criminal defense, estate planning and family law -- doesn't fluctuate with the economy like securities and real estate, which drive business at large law firms.

But it's not easy to hang out a shingle and go at it alone or with a handful of partners.

Still, almost two-thirds of the lawyers in Greater Sacramento are doing it.

About 62 percent of California lawyers practice in solo or small firms with two to five lawyers, according to the State Bar of California. That translates to 5,582 of the 9,003 lawyers in the four-county Sacramento area.

Some are independent souls who want sole authority from the get go. Others work in government or large firms for years before they strike out on their own.

There's also the stark reality that large law firms eye top-tier law school graduates as new recruits, leaving the rest to find work someplace else. The top 25 law firms in Sacramento (see list, page 27) employ 742 lawyers, or 8 percent of the local pool.

How it goes in small practice depends on the person, the specialty and what he or she wants to get out of it, sources say. Income may be higher than in government work; it's likely to be lower than pay at large firms -- and it fluctuates all over the place.

Yet most lawyers in solo or very small firms are hooked.

"I enjoy the independence," said Bill Kopper, a Davis lawyer who started solo in 1981 and participated in a small partnership in the late 1980s before going solo again.

Susan Carlsen, an employment lawyer who left **Kronick Moskowitz Tiedemann & Girard** with Vida Thomas in 2000 to establish a two-partner firm, feels like she found heaven.

"I work the hours I want to work. I take the work I want to take in -- and I say 'No' to a whole lot of work I don't feel pressured to take," Carlsen said. "I get to live my life the way I want to live it."

Lack of backup

It's great to be the big cheese in charge of clients until the copier goes down for the third time in one day and there's nobody else to fix it. And it's one thing to work when you



Dennis McCoy | Sacramento Business Journal

Attorney Kulvinder Singh, left, works with one of his clients. Singh speaks Punjabi and found steady business with South Asian immigrants.

[View Larger](#)

Search for Jobs powered by onTargetJobs

[View Sacramento Jobs - 11245 jobs today](#)

Business Resources

[Starting a Business](#)

Sponsored by **iContact®**
His dislike of shopping led to an idea for a company.

[Sales & Marketing](#)

Sponsored by **Hoovers®**
She shifted targets to keep business flowing.

[Business Strategy](#)

They added a profitable division instead of cutting back.

[Technology](#)

Sponsored by **AT&T®**
CompuData has built a tech business through steady work.

[HR & Hiring](#)

Sponsored by **SkillSoft®**
Coverage cuts: Small businesses pinching pennies cut health insurance.

Business Resource Centers

Tools, advice, case studies and more



Business Strategy



Sales & Marketing



Tech & Innovation



Starting a Business



HR & Hiring

... want and another to take vacation without backup.

More than three-quarters of the lawyers disciplined by the State Bar work as solo practitioners, reflective of the high numbers in this type of practice but also suggesting that missed deadlines, poor client communication and "borrowing" from client trust funds happen far more at this level.

"Primarily, it is a lack of a check system or backup for sole providers," said Scott Drexel, chief trial counsel for the State Bar. "In a larger firm, if a client has a complaint regarding the service they are getting, they'll go to the partner, make the complaint known, and the firm will make sure it is addressed. If it's a solo practice, there is really nowhere to go to complain except the State Bar."

Those disciplined are not necessarily more incompetent than their peers in large firms, Drexel said.

"They may have personal problems or issues -- just like people in firms -- like going through a divorce, having a sick child or spouse, or a substance abuse problem," he said.

In a law firm, someone else would step in and provide cover.

It's a scary proposition to hang out a shingle, particularly with school loans to pay.

"If you're a brand new lawyer, you may take anything that walks in the door," said Kulvinder Singh, a Roseville attorney and member of the executive committee of the solo and small firm section of the State Bar. "But it's your duty, if you are not competent in that area, to get competent or turn them away."

Pages: [1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [Continue Reading →](#)

READER COMMENTS

(0) Comments

You must be logged in to add a comment. Please [Login](#) or [Register](#).

[Contact the Editor](#) [Need Assistance?](#) [More Latest News →](#)

More News Headlines

Popular News Stories

Related Industry News

- [Davis to step down as Elon Law dean Aug. 1](#) [Greensboro/Winston-Salem]
- [Exodus from Hutchison Law Group casts light on small firm's challenges](#) [Raleigh/Durham]
- [Nossaman merges with D.C. firm](#) [San Francisco]
- [Summer hiring at law firms down](#) [Austin]
- [President Bush to remove ban on offshore oil drilling](#) [Houston]

Latest News

- [Bridge Bank stock drops on lower earnings](#)
- [10 percent Medi-Cal fee cut reinstated for pharmacies](#)
- [EU files new Intel charges](#)
- [Five Greater Sacramento Starbucks stores to close](#)
- [Blue Cross, Blue Shield settle fight over canceled insurance](#)

Business Pulse Survey
[How safe is your bank?](#)

Email Alerts
Get the latest local business news delivered to your inbox. [Sign up Today!](#)

Featured Jobs

 powered by [onTargetJobs](#)

- [Executive Director](#) - American Diabetes Association
- [Sales Manager – Silicon Valley](#) - Business Wire, a Berkshire Hathaway Company
- [OB/GYN](#) - confidential
- [SIU Investigator](#) - Access Insurance Holdings, Inc.
- [Territory Sales Manager Central California](#) - Access Insurance Holdings, Inc.

[Search Jobs](#) | [Post Resume](#) | [Online Degrees](#)

[Post a Job](#) | [Feature a Job](#)

FEATURED RESOURCE

FREE SALARY REPORT

[Post a Job & Receive a FREE Premium Salary Report](#)

Post a job online with bizjournals.com and get a PayScale Salary Report - FREE (a \$99 value)! Report contains:

- Salary & Hourly Rates
- Bonus & Benefits
- Skills, Experience & Education

[Click here to redeem this offer](#)

Sacramento Real Estate

 powered by [LoopNet](#)

[Featured Property](#)

Price: \$1,400,000
Building Size: 16,000 SF
Use Type: Sale



[→ More Sacramento Real Estate](#)

Sponsored Links

[workplace_regulations](#)



Sacramento Business Directory

[California Articles](#)

BEGINNERS TO BIGSHOTS

[Ex-Marine with a mission](#)

Entrepreneurship wasn't former Marine Mark Llano's first mission, but it's





From beginners to BIGSHOTS

bizjournals
LIFE: SACRAMENTO, CA



SACRAMENTO BUSINESS JOURNAL

EL DORADO PLAZA SACRAMENTO, CALIF. 95833

Members: [Log in](#)
Not Registered? [Register](#) for free extra services.

Subscribe Now Get A Free Trial

Choose Another Market:
Sacramento

- HOME | ONLINE EDITION ▾ | PRINT EDITION ▾ | SUBSCRIBE ▾ | MARKETPLACE ▾ | BUSINESS RESOURCES ▾ | EVENTS ▾ | CAREERS ▾ | TRAVEL ▾

Search [Search Archive](#)

- [News by Company](#) | [News by Industry](#) | [People in the News](#)

IN DEPTH:

[Sacramento](#) > [Print Edition](#) > [Industries](#) > [Business Services - Legal Services](#)

[Subscribe to Sacramento Business Journal](#)

Friday, May 23, 2008

Small practice, big business

Almost two-thirds of California lawyers strike out on their own, but going solo offers its share of risk

Sacramento Business Journal - by [Kathy Robertson](#) Staff writer

- [Print Article](#) | [Email Article](#) | [Reprints](#) | [RSS Feeds](#) | [Add to Del.icio.us](#) | [Digg This](#)

Related News

[500 Capitol Mall signs McDonough](#)
[Sacramento]

[Green movement creates new legal opportunities](#) [San Francisco]

[Businesses find entertainment is cheap ticket to impress clients](#)
[Sacramento]

[Firm drops high-rise for railroad](#)
[Sacramento]

[Law firms woo, retain quality attorneys with part-time options](#)
[Sacramento]

Starting out solo

Some pick this route because of the type of law they want to practice.

Criminal defense, personal injury, family law, wills and trusts are the meat-and-potatoes of the legal marketplace. Although these cases might involve big money, they revolve around a particular need at a particular time and can be easily handled by a small number of lawyers.

One way for new lawyers to get work is through ties to a particular community, said Singh, who speaks Punjabi and found steady business with South Asian immigrants in Yuba City before moving his practice to Roseville.

Immigration cases are a staple for solo lawyers, too, and there's much talk among local lawyers in the South Asian Bar and other groups about sharing referrals and coverage, Singh said.



Dennis McCoy | Sacramento Business Journal

Attorney Kulvinder Singh, left, works with one of his clients. Singh speaks Punjabi and found steady business with South Asian immigrants.

[View Larger](#)

Many lawyers go small because they don't have a choice.

"Not everybody can graduate (from law school) in the top 10 percent; in fact, 90 percent can't," Singh said. That generally means sitting for the state bar exam without a job prospect and scurrying for work after results are posted in November.

Downey Brand LLP, Sacramento's largest law firm, doesn't have "hard and fast rules" but generally looks for students with good grades from top-tier schools or some kind of special circumstances that make them stand out, said Tom Storelli, the firm's executive director.

McDonough Holland & Allen, No. 2 in town in terms of size, has no definite line but looks for well-rounded individuals who do well in campus interviews, said Tyson Shower, chair of the firm's recruitment committee.

Billable hour requirements at large firms and years of grunt work before achieving control over a case have some lawyers thinking small is good.

Kopper graduated from the **University of California Davis** School of Law in 1981. The few opportunities to join firms "were not particularly appealing," he said. He knew people making it in solo practice and figured he'd give it a shot.

Kopper started out doing family law, wills and trusts, but now he is known for filing union-backed lawsuits seeking to halt big development projects by alleging inadequate environmental review or mitigation. The probate work is the most profitable. New business comes by word of mouth.

"I have a few good areas, so if one is down, the other is up," Kopper said. "It's working pretty well."

Matt Temmerman is an intellectual property lawyer, unusual for solo practitioners. He teamed up with Dan Maguire to do patent law in Davis but found himself on his own six months later when Maguire took a job in the governor's office.

"The demand of big firms just didn't fit into my lifestyle. I wanted quality of life," Temmerman said. That perspective, in a large firm, puts a lawyer off partnership track and "stuck doing work you don't want to do," he said.

Search for Jobs powered by onTargetJobs

[View Sacramento Jobs - 11245 jobs today](#)

Business Resources

Starting a Business
Sponsored by **iContact®**
His dislike of shopping led to an idea for a company.

Sales & Marketing
Sponsored by **Hoovers®**
She shifted targets to keep business flowing.

Business Strategy
They added a profitable division instead of cutting back.

Technology
Sponsored by **AT&T®**
CompuData has built a tech business through steady work.

HR & Hiring Sponsored by **SkillSoft®**
Coverage cuts: Small businesses pinching pennies cut health insurance.

Business Resource Centers

Tools, advice, case studies and more



Business Strategy



Sales & Marketing



Tech & Innovation



Starting a Business



HR & Hiring

from bizjournals

Email Alerts

Get the latest local business news delivered to your inbox. [Sign up Today!](#)

Intense bailout

Carlson waited until her youngest child graduated from college before she was ready to take the financial risk of leaving Kronick for a small firm of her own.

"I was ready to take a leadership role, but I wanted to work fewer hours rather than more," she said.

Although she brought a solid book of business with her, Carlsen's income varies month to month, quarter to quarter, year to year. "That's fine with me," she said. "I make plenty of money."

Denise Dirk was a single mom with a house payment, car payment, two dogs and a cat when she left a six-year position with a local firm to start an office of her own. Frustrated at a lack of career progress at her old job, she tracked her numbers and figured she could do better.

She made more money in the first six months as a solo than she did her last six months at the firm, but admits the transition "was intense."

Former district attorneys or other types of government lawyers form yet another cadre of solo or small practice lawyers.

Pages: [1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [Continue Reading →](#)

READER COMMENTS

(0) Comments

You must be logged in to add a comment. Please [Login](#) or [Register](#).

[Contact the Editor](#)

[Need Assistance?](#)

[More Latest News →](#)

[More News Headlines](#)

[Popular News Stories](#)

Related Industry News

- [Davis to step down as Elon Law dean Aug. 1](#) [Greensboro/Winston-Salem]
- [Exodus from Hutchison Law Group casts light on small firm's challenges](#) [Raleigh/Durham]
- [Nossaman merges with D.C. firm](#) [San Francisco]
- [Summer hiring at law firms down](#) [Austin]
- [President Bush to remove ban on offshore oil drilling](#) [Houston]

Latest News

- [Bridge Bank stock drops on lower earnings](#)
- [10 percent Medi-Cal fee cut reinstated for pharmacies](#)
- [EU files new Intel charges](#)
- [Five Greater Sacramento Starbucks stores to close](#)
- [Blue Cross, Blue Shield settle fight over canceled insurance](#)

Business Pulse Survey

[How safe is your bank?](#)

CITY GUIDE SPOTLIGHT - SACRAMENTO



[Attractions in Sacramento](#)
[Cocktails in Sacramento](#)
[Hotels in Sacramento](#)
[Restaurants in Sacramento](#)

Sponsored by:



Featured Jobs

powered by [onTargetJobs](#)

- [Executive Director](#) - American Diabetes Association
- [Sales Manager – Silicon Valley](#) - Business Wire, a Berkshire Hathaway Company
- [OB/GYN](#) - confidential
- [SIU Investigator](#) - Access Insurance Holdings, Inc.
- [Territory Sales Manager Central California](#) - Access Insurance Holdings, Inc.

[Search Jobs](#) | [Post Resume](#) | [Online Degrees](#)

[Post a Job](#) | [Feature a Job](#)

FEATURED RESOURCE

FREE SALARY REPORT

Post a Job & Receive a FREE Premium Salary Report

Post a job online with bizjournals.com and get a PayScale Salary Report - FREE (a \$99 value)! Report contains:

- Salary & Hourly Rates
- Bonus & Benefits
- Skills, Experience & Education

[Click here to redeem this offer](#)

Sacramento Real Estate

powered by [LoopNet](#)

Featured Property

Price: \$1,400,000
Building Size: 16,000 SF
Use Type: Sale



→ [More Sacramento Real Estate](#)

Sponsored Links

workplace_regulations



Sacramento Business Directory

California Articles

BEGINNERS TO BIGSHOTS 8(a) program offers a broader push

When Melanie Breeden set out to make an indelible mark on the business world, she found an invaluable ally in the Small Business Administration. Since opening in 2003, Cherokee Painting LLC has performed beyond her dreams. The commercial industrial paint contractor has landed jobs including school districts, the local Job Corps and Tinker Air Force Base, with contracts ranging from \$30,000 to \$1 million.



Sponsored by:



BUSINESS TOOLS

provided by iContact

Really Easy Email Marketing from iContact Email Marketing with iContact is extremely easy & very low cost (Starting at \$9.95!). On top of 350+ templates, you get tracking, surveying, autoresponders, and industry leading deliverability.

"iContact blows the competition out of the water"

"TopTenREVIEWS Gold Award Winner for Email Marketing"

[Click here to sign up for a Free Trial today](#)





Would you like to retire early?

Members: Log in Not Registered? Register for free extra services.



Choose Another Market: Sacramento

Search Keywords GO Search Archive

News by Company News by Industry People in the News

IN DEPTH:

Sacramento > Print Edition > Industries > Business Services - Legal Services

Subscribe to Sacramento Business Journal

Friday, May 23, 2008

Small practice, big business

Almost two-thirds of California lawyers strike out on their own, but going solo offers its share of risk

Sacramento Business Journal - by Kathy Robertson Staff writer

Print Article Email Article Reprints RSS Feeds Add to Del.icio.us Digg This

Related News

500 Capitol Mall signs McDonough [Sacramento]

Green movement creates new legal opportunities [San Francisco]

Businesses find entertainment is cheap ticket to impress clients [Sacramento]

Firm drops high-rise for rail yard [Sacramento]

Law firms woo, retain quality attorneys with part-time options [Sacramento]

After 20 years as a prosecutor, Thomas Johnson wanted more control over his career, and he needed more money with four children looking toward college.

The change was significant -- and much more stressful than he expected.

"I thought my understanding of criminal law would carry me because I feel so comfortable in it," he said. "But you can be a great criminal lawyer and not know how to run a business."

Johnson's hours in the private sector are 30 percent to 40 percent higher than government work, but his income has grown more than that. He worked 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. last Saturday and went to the Placer County jail at 7 a.m. Sunday before meeting his wife at church.

"There is a price to this," he said, "but I feel totally energized."



Dennis McCoy | Sacramento Business Journal

Attorney Kulvinder Singh, left, works with one of his clients. Singh speaks Punjabi and found steady business with South Asian immigrants.

View Larger

Search for Jobs powered by onTargetJobs View Sacramento Jobs - 11245 jobs today

Business Resources

Starting a Business Sponsored by iContact@ His dislike of shopping led to an idea for a company.

Sales & Marketing Sponsored by Hoovers@ She shifted targets to keep business flowing.

Business Strategy They added a profitable division instead of cutting back.

Technology Sponsored by AT&T@ CompuData has built a tech business through steady work.

HR & Hiring Sponsored by SkillSoft@ Coverage cuts: Small businesses pinching pennies cut health insurance.

krobertson@bizjournals.com | 916-558-7869

Pages: 1 2 3

READER COMMENTS

(0) Comments

You must be logged in to add a comment. Please Login or Register.

Contact the Editor Need Assistance? More Latest News ->

More News Headlines Popular News Stories

Related Industry News

- Davis to step down as Elon Law dean Aug. 1 [Greensboro/Winston-Salem] Exodus from Hutchison Law Group casts light on small firm's challenges [Raleigh/Durham] Nossaman merges with D.C. firm [San Francisco] Summer hiring at law firms down [Austin] President Bush to remove ban on offshore oil drilling [Houston]

Latest News

- Bridge Bank stock drops on lower earnings 10 percent Medi-Cal fee cut reinstated for pharmacies EU files new Intel charges Five Greater Sacramento Starbucks stores to close Blue Cross, Blue Shield settle fight over canceled insurance

Business Resource Centers

Tools, advice, case studies and more



from bizjournals

Email Alerts

Get the latest local business news delivered to your inbox. Sign up Today!