

Lessons Learned From 10 Years of Running Our Law Firm

Nothing about owning a law firm is easy. There will be challenges when you're a solo, and there will be challenges when you have 10, 20, or 50 attorneys and staff.

September 30, 2026 at 01:05 PM By **Jeffrey W. Varcadipane** and **Dawn M. Pinnisi**



Jeffrey W. Varcadipane (L) and Dawn M. Pinnisi (R) of Varcadipane & Pinnisi. Courtesy Photos

Ten years ago, we were working at large, high-volume law firms handling mostly civil litigation and personal injury cases. After more than a decade in these environments, we thought we could offer our clients a better experience—and better results—as the owners of a small law firm with a smaller docket of cases that allowed us to dig into our clients' matters and maximize their value.

So we took the leap in May 2016 and launched Varcadipane & Pinnisi, P.C. In doing so, we received a crash course in building, managing, and growing a law firm. We've learned important lessons along the way that helped us grow to over 10 attorneys and staff at our 10-year anniversary. We realize that not every firm that opens its doors reaches a 10th anniversary, and we don't take for granted that ours has.

Below are a few lessons we've learned, which we hope will help our fellow members of the bar grow or launch their law firms.

Don't Let Fear Block You From Seizing an Opportunity

Most humans are risk-averse, but we lawyers are especially so. A lawyer with a familiar yet unsatisfying position in a large firm may yearn for an opportunity to fulfill their potential but be hindered by the uncertainties that come with risk taking. If they're gainfully employed by an established law firm, they likely have the pleasure of a steady paycheck, health insurance, and an ongoing boost to their ego. They may feel they have much to lose if they leave their position to start a law firm and it fails.

Knowing what we know now, we would argue that the riskier path is to put your career in the hands of others whose priorities will not always align with yours. Yes, running a law firm is difficult. You will feel stressed and often second-guess yourself. But there is significantly more opportunity available to you as a law firm owner than as an attorney at another firm, even if you're a partner there. If you allow fear to prevent you from seizing the opportunity to go out on your own, you will sacrifice immense upside potential for the short-term comfort of not disrupting the status quo.

None of this is to pretend that the risk isn't real. Plenty of firms open their doors and never find their footing. In our experience, the firms that struggle usually do so for reasons largely within their owners' control—underpricing their work, failing to market effectively, neglecting the clients they already have, mismanaging cash flow, or never building the firm past themselves. The downside of going out on your own is real, but it is more manageable than many attorneys believe.

Have the Confidence to Bet on Yourself

On a related point, in our experience, attorneys often underestimate their ability to build a practice. They worry that they will not attract clients. They fear they do not know how to run an office. They're anxious that their professional knowledge is less than perfect. These are legitimate concerns, but they can be met and overcome.

As for clients, during your time at your current/previous firm, you might have built a roster of clients who are pleased with your work. They think of you, and not your firm, as their attorney. These clients are the most likely candidates to seek you out when you launch your own firm. Have confidence that they will stay with you, and that they will recommend you to their friends and neighbors. If you put in the work and treat your existing clients with professional care and attention, then you will have taken important preliminary steps toward building your new firm's client base.

It is important to remember that you may—and likely will—make mistakes early in areas like compliance and regulatory issues (such as payroll, hiring, and firing), cash flow management, and the realities of running a business that has overhead. Learn from your mistakes, educate yourself about what you don't know, or hire someone to do those things for you, and keep moving forward.

Speaking of cash flow management, we'd be remiss if we didn't mention that if you're working in a contingency-heavy practice like personal injury, your income is going to move in fits and starts. It can take years before you secure recoveries in your cases, but during that time you will be funding both case expenses and your firm's operations. This creates an obvious cash flow problem. Be cognizant of this potential issue and consider whether you could launch an additional hourly-based practice or two to help smooth out the cash flow fluctuations. At the same time, don't get so absorbed in the day-to-day numbers that you lose sight of the bigger picture. Early on, it is easy to fixate on the micro—every check you write, every hour you bill—and to miss the macro—the trajectory of the business you are building.

Delegate Your Work, Buy Back Your Time, and Train Your People Well

Early on, you will likely feel as though you cannot afford to hire attorneys and staff. But there will come a point at which you cannot afford not to.

Your time is valuable. Forgoing your actual or effective billable-hour rate to do administrative work that someone making a fraction of that rate can capably do is the quickest way to burn yourself out while sinking your firm financially. Hire help and buy your time back so that you can focus on high-revenue-generating activities like client work and networking with current and prospective clients and referral sources.

Here, there will be a measure of faith in yourself that you will need to draw on because you may have to invest in hiring attorneys and staff before you are absolutely sure you will have the revenue to pay for it. It will surely feel uncomfortable, but the unease you may feel is the price of growth and progress. We both felt that unease, but hiring our first staff member and first attorney were milestones in our firm's growth.

When you do hire attorneys and staff, invest in them by training them on the substance of the law, how your firm manages and prosecutes its cases, and the culture you're building. (More on that in a moment.) Give them real client exposure early on and be willing to let them grow into their roles. Training is how you develop A-players and build loyalty among your team. Many attorneys have the same concern about training junior attorneys and staff: "What if we invest in developing them but they leave?" We wholeheartedly agree with the popular retort, "What if we don't train them, but they stay?"

Intentionally Build a Culture, not Just Headcount

We're willing to bet that most attorneys who launch their own firm do so, at least in part, because they were unsatisfied with the culture of their former firm. If you work for a high-volume firm like we both did, you might feel bound by a practice that only values

moving cases through the assembly line as fast as possible. You may have to work long hours that take you away from time with your family. You may not have the authority to make meaningful decisions.

The most productive law firm cultures are built intentionally. Let the shortcomings of the culture at your previous firm inform the culture you build at your own firm. If you do not make a conscious effort to build a culture at your firm, one will develop organically, and it might not be the kind you want. Based on our experiences at other firms, we wanted to build a culture at our firm that recognized the importance of family and of balancing professional priorities with personal ones. So we made it a point to build a culture that does so. We've also done our best to be introspective and see our firm and its culture through the eyes of our attorneys and staff, so we can take action when necessary to maintain the culture we want to build.

This intentionality extends to our firm's culture of client service. Clients are the lifeblood of legal practices, yet some attorneys still treat clients poorly. This shouldn't be revelatory, but we honor our duty to take our clients' matters seriously, communicate with them regularly, and zealously advocate for them. As a matter of practice, we make sure our attorneys and staff get back to a client within 24 hours—even when the attorney handling the matter is in trial. We treat clients respectfully, like the fellow human beings they are, and listen to what they say.

The closer we listen and the more information we glean from our clients about their matters, the more effectively we can prosecute their cases and hopefully maximize their value. Careful listening may uncover facts that expand a matter, such as an additional claim worth pursuing or another potentially responsible defendant. And, of course, a client who feels heard and treated well by their attorney and law firm is highly likely to refer friends and family to that attorney and firm.

This attention to each client is also a deliberate business decision. Our experiences at high-volume firms pushed us to prioritize quality over volume. A firm juggling thousands of matters cannot give each one proper attention and will likely resolve many for a fraction of their value. By keeping a smaller docket, we can work each case up fully and pursue the maximum recovery for our clients rather than settling for pennies on the dollar.

The people you hire will reinforce or undermine the culture you build at your firm. When you hire attorneys and staff, vet them for cultural fit as much as, if not more than, expertise in a particular area of the law. You can train a motivated and intelligent attorney or staff member to practice in a given area and on your firm's systems and procedures. But good luck training someone to be a people person, always willing to pitch in to help colleagues, or to leave no stone unturned in their quest to solve a client's problem. It might take time to find the right person to hire, but a bad hire made in haste costs far more than the time invested in finding a good fit.

Lessons on Law Firm Management From the School of Hard Knocks

Nothing about owning a law firm is easy. There will be challenges when you're a solo, and there will be challenges when you have 10, 20, or 50 attorneys and staff. We've made plenty of mistakes over the last 10 years and faced countless obstacles. But we wouldn't trade the experience for anything, and we count our blessings for the ability to practice law the way we believe it should be practiced. We hope these lessons learned help you on your journey to build a firm that gives you the ability to practice law the way you believe it should be practiced.

Jeffrey W. Varcadipane is a founding partner and Certified Civil Trial Attorney at Varcadipane & Pinnisi, where he handles a variety of matters in New Jersey and New York, including civil and commercial litigation, appellate practice, real estate, and business law. He can be reached at jwp@vplaw.com.

Dawn M. Pinnisi is a founding partner and trial attorney at Varcadipane & Pinnisi, where she predominantly handles injury claims, including traumatic brain injury claims, in New York and New Jersey on behalf of victims of product liability, professional malpractice, and negligence. She can be reached at dmp@vplaw.com.

Page printed from: <https://www.law.com/njlawjournal/2026/09/30/lessons-learned-from-10-years-of-running-our-law-firm/print/>

NOT FOR REPRINT

© 2026 ALM Global, LLC, All Rights Reserved. Request academic re-use from www.copyright.com. All other uses, submit a request to asset-and-logo-licensing@alm.com. For more information visit [Asset & Logo Licensing](#).