

# Popular Threads on Solosez

## Did Your Law School Prepare You to Be a Solo?

I was wondering if any of you went into solo practice immediately following law school? If so, did you think your law school did anything to help you, either by offering courses or through career services? What did they do?

And for those of you who went into solo practice later on...did you always desire to go into solo practice? Do you think if your law school would have better prepared you, that you would have gone into solo practice immediately, or do you think it is necessary to have other work experience first?

Just wanted your thoughts....thanks!

Sandhya Bathija

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I went into solo practice in a small upstate NY village immediately after law school. That was my plan from the beginning. My law school really had no preparation specially designed for solo practitioners, but my mentors there did encourage me. All of the career guidance offered was geared into getting people into firms (of any size). What did help me was my selection of my third year internship. While the younger members of my class (I was already in my 50's) all went after high profile firms, federal clerkships, etc., my first choice was everyone else's fallback: I got to be a law clerk to a city court judge in a medium-sized city. My interview argument was that I was going solo and staying upstate, and that I would get to work with and see the kinds of things that I would in practice. This turned out to be true, and that one year internship was more of an education/preparation for practice than all of my other classes put together.

My only criticism of law school is what I heard from others before I began: "In law school, you learn about law. You learn how to be a lawyer once you start practicing, and you learn your craft at the expense of your clients." Although there was a required first year class entitled "law firm", it focused mainly on drafting minor documents and not at all with the business end of managing time, keeping files straight, marketing yourself or your firm, getting and sizing up clients, etc. This in contrast to an old friend who went to chiropractic school, where a significant part of his final year was devoted classes relating to developing his practice, attracting clientele, and "chiropractic jurisprudence" (whatever that is, but those were his own words).

Charles Oliver Wolff

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My law school (California Western School of Law in San Diego) seems to be very supportive of any student's decision to go solo. I am currently taking a course called "Practicing Law." The class should be called "How To Start A Law Firm." For assignments, we keep a journal that describes the nuts and bolts of running a law practice. We literally talk about how to market, keep files, use office technology, find office space, hire employees, etc. Our final project is what will turn out to be a scaled-down business plan. The class is taught by an extremely competent and successful retired litigator. We have also had guest speakers who have opened their own practices in various areas of the law.

Career services is also very helpful. They are always glad to help with networking, etc. I am pretty sure that they keep copies of Foonberg and other related books in the library. Plus, they are invaluable when it comes to helping you find real experience, not just fancy names on your resume. If you tell them you want to go solo, they will try to put you in touch with places where you can learn the practice and business of law. I have been talking with many of my friends, who are 1-3 year associates at bigger firms. For the most part, it seems like I have been doing most of the same work since the day after my last 1L final.

While I think my law school does a good job of offering resources, I am glad they refrain from doing any hand holding. As with anything, I imagine the rewarding part of going solo is having to fight your own battles and find your own way. That is why I am so glad to have chosen this profession. It is also why I have been so terribly impatient about getting a bar card.

Best Wishes, Joel Christiansen Law Student/ Law Clerk

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In answer to your first question: Yes, straight out of law school, single mother of two kids 15 and 12. So it must be do-able.

In answer to your second question: HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHHA!!!

Carolyn J. Stevens

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While I have changed a number of times over the years, I started solo right out of law school. The single best course I took and that has proven to be the most valuable in my solo practice was "Trial Advocacy." It was a hands on course based upon the NITA program.

The "school" did nothing to help, encourage or mentor. Hence my recalcitrance when I get hit up for alumni donations.

Randy Birch

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I forgot about this goodie. I took it between finals and the bar exam. Nice little break. In retrospect, I never would have taken it had it not been for one of my trusted (and much smarter) classmate who said, Oh, come on, you can do it. Intense, scary for an introvert who knew the dean confused her with a student named Stephens and graduated her. The faculty was

tremendous. And, frankly, once you're in practice, you're not going to let go of \$700 and a week of your time. I did it because it was free for graduating students and I'd probably never have the guts to do it later.

Carolyn J. Stevens

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If I had been allowed to sit for the bar exam without ever having gone to law school, I would have done so, after taking a bar exam prep course.

Peter Wizenberg

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I don't quite agree with Peter, but I am tempted.

I attended the University of Wyoming. We had a legal writing class first semester of law school. The class of legal research in the library was also fairly helpful. If you were one of the lucky few to win the lottery, you could also participate in one of the 3 legal clinics at my school. I wasn't one of the lucky few. But serving on the Law Review editorial board and getting a casenote published was a nice consolation prize (mostly for its value in showing me that I do actually have the capacity to work like a dog if needed).

Aside from that, I think the primary contribution that law school provided me with was a firm conviction that I didn't want to touch a money-grubbing, 80 hour workweek, biglaw prison with a forty foot pole.

After passing the bar exam, I started looking for local court clerkships and government jobs. When I got shut out of those, I decided to throw caution to the winds and do what I wanted to do in the first place - run a debtor-focused bankruptcy practice.

My career counseling office was a virtual non-entity during this process. Almost all the networking I did to get a foothold in the Boulder county legal market, I did myself with no guidance from our career counselor.

I do however appreciate the help they gave me proofreading my resume (which didn't result in even a single interview). Maybe someday I'll put it in a scrapbook for display as a historical curiosity.

The internet, on the other hand, was invaluable. Honestly, three months on the Solosez listserve taught me more about running a law practice than 3 years of law school.

Seth D. Rogers

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I was pushing 60 when I went to law school. Had done many things but only held one license before--in real estate. When I got it, that state required that you serve a year under a broker before you could get a broker's license.

With that background and my personal caution, it was unthinkable to go solo out of the gate. I was not concerned about the business side, just

wanted to learn law. So, I never sought practical experience. During last two years, I clerked part time for a federal judge. Summer second year, I got an award that paid a tad to serve as law clerk rotating through 4 judges in state circuit.

My law school was still in probationary period as to accreditation. As a result they were squeaky clean--pure law--all law--nothing but law. Most profs would not even answer questions except in the Socratic mode. There was one miserable clinic program in which I participated.

I was lucky to get a full ride: half by merit scholarship, half work study. For the later, I organized and taught the computer research program. In those days it was supposed that West and Lexis could only be accessed by dedicated terminals and major law schools might be content with a handful of terminals that were available only to 3L's..

I had to maintain a B to keep the scholarship. Sounds easy until you know that the Dean had decreed that there should be only one "A" per course, per section. In the first semester, I indulged myself by a battle with a prof, resulting in a D in a 3 credit course. After that I had to scramble for A's to keep my B until graduation.

With that and writing for the judges it never occurred to me to attempt law review or writing competitions.

Then and now, I thought learning how judges think was the most important thing. On balance, I think it is best to begin by letting others worry about the business side, while you test your attorney skills.

Learning to make snowballs will not teach you to make snow or even how to get around in a snowstorm.

John Page

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So, that makes you about...95 years old now. You must be our oldest solosezzer.

Michael Blake

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May be the presiding raisin in these sunny halls, but I'm a mere lad of 75 until December.

I suspect some among us are older, but more circumspect.

John Page

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Yes, to the extent that it is possible for a law school to get a student ready to be a solo. One of the reasons that I chose to go to my 4th tier school (besides the 2 year accelerated program) was because it has a Solo/General Practice concentration. I was required to take a Law Practice Management class in which a solo practitioner taught us about running a law office, using the Foonberg book as a guide. For the final, we had to write a 20

page business plan for our law practice. I also had to take classes I would have never taken on my own. One was a pre-trial class, where we prepared briefs and presented arguments in actual courtrooms in front of judges. The other was Trial Workshop. We were also required to complete an externship prior to graduation. I externed with solo near the school. He taught me a LOT about solo practice and dealing with clients. Also, since I've graduated the school has added an Interviewing & Counseling class. There is only so much school can teach you about having your own practice. But I'd say that my school did a decent job of getting me ready.

Majdel S. Musa

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My 4th tier law school also had a Law Practice Management Class, and I was working for a solo practitioner who office shared with 4 other solos. I thought I'd do pretty well, since I was learning the actual ins and outs of a solo's office...my professor had other plans. Seems the marketing techniques used successfully by the 5 solos in the office were not "successful" per my professor. What I mostly took away from the course was that success means different things to different people as far as their practice goes. I'm working in a small town in a 3 attorney firm...very casual and it has been around for 12 years before I showed up, but far from successful in my professors eyes...

Amy Ondos

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I apparently went to school with Bob, but in 1999-2002 and it was called USC.

Honestly, that seminar I took in Winter, 2002 on Terrorism, which was put on the syllabus BEFORE 9/11 and held AFTER, was amazing, as was the seminar on Bioethics which I "Damn-jured", but I always had a "screw the GPA" attitude in choosing classes and making decisions about how much to study.

However, the only practical course I took was one on Mediation where we did negotiation almost the whole semester because we were having so much fun with it and so the professor (an adjunct) let us run with it. I can now buy cars and negotiate settlements, but when I graduated I honestly did not know ANYTHING about, say, what a complaint or answer looked like or even was.

I remember asking someone at my first legal job, "What is the difference between a complaint and a pleading?"

They offered Trial advocacy and Pretrial, I just somehow didn't take them...

I know of 3 other solos from my law school class, though, and the rest of the people are great for getting referrals from

Amy Kleinpeter

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I have no problem with the fact that, at law school, I learned about law. It was, after all, not LAW FIRM SCHOOL. Anyway, I can't imagine going directly into solo practice -- I learned so much from being a big firm slave, a govt lawyer litigator and then developing my marketing skills and work ethic at a mid-sized firm. In my humble opinion, you learn about running a law firm by working in one -- only AFTER learning about the law in law school. The system was fine for me.

Margaret A. Dillenburg

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Some people have a strong calling to do what they do, I have been somewhat inapposite. I have every confidence in success in varied endeavors and approaches, and choose alternatives based on information and research, not from a passion or strong calling. I can be happy doing many things, as it is after all a state of mind.

Philosophy as applied to my practice means that I am pleased with my choices and know that I can change them if I want to and succeed in another direction. While I greatly respect those with a clear vision of their life and where they want to be, I have not ever been one to approach it that way.

With regard to law schools, some have good support for a new lawyer starting out. Similarly, some states do a good job of supporting the newly licensed solo. In some law schools there are organizations that are student-run and attempt to prepare you for practice. In some there are clinics. In many you can choose to clerk with a solo or small firm for contacts and some perspective on doing it that way.

Last I researched, the clinician approach, the clerkship and the student-run organization were the three most common available. There may be a career services office that offers this support, but if so I have not heard about it (or forgot).

Whether you desire to practice in Texas or not, you might consider perusing some of the information accessible from the State Bar's website. You may find support there. As I recall, Wisconsin, Oklahoma and some other states also have good support mechanisms in their respective states.

Darrell G. Stewart

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Yeah--I came out of law school as a pretty fair jurisprudential philosopher--the job interviews were hell.

Dick O'Connor

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I've offered this advice over and over to mentee (If I assume I'm a mentOR) law students: get a job in a law firm as soon as the law school will permit it, if you need a paralegal license, get it--you can do a lot of law with it. Screw those people who say to not work, study all the time, build up your GPA. By a year or two, when you have a job with a law firm, no one will care or even ask you about your GPA. The advantages

are three-fold:

1. If you do a good job, you'll have a job without having to look for one after graduation and until the bar results come out--even later if you pass the bar. See--that means a paycheck (can you say "MONEY") in lieu of spending your days going from law firm to law firm looking for a job and sending out useless resumes:
2. And you have the leisure to look around for another law firm if you want to practice a different kind of law, or if think you can make more money. An ancient Chinese lawyer and philosopher, about 3,500 years ago, said: "It's always easier to find a job if you already have one."
3. You will learn more practical law working for good law firm for a year than you will in three years at Harvard Law

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Law school taught me how to think like a lawyer, how to research like a lawyer and how to put legal arguments together.

Eight years of working for a small firm taught me how to litigate a case from beginning to end, and how to counsel clients like a lawyer.

Marketing, finances, practice management, I learned on my own.

David Silverstone

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No doubt about it, law school teaches you to use tools such as careful research and legal writing (it also helps to be on the school law review). However--you learn how to actually use those tools in in the real legal world in a good law firm--with real clients--that's where the rubber meets the road.

It sounds to me that you followed the right road to a successful practice. But I'll still stand by what I said: go to work for a law firm as soon as you can.

Dick O'Connor

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I went to Hofstra Law on Long Island. I knew early on that I was going to start my own firm soon if not right after law school. I also knew I wanted to try cases and if possible, criminal cases. Hence I benefitted not only by learning to think like a lawyer but also in practical skills teaching courses like trial techniques, pre-trial litigation and of course a clinic. When I hung my shingle some 5 months after being admitted to the bar, my ole' Profs sent work and still do! Sure a lot of it was scut work in the beginning, but I thought it was the best work I had, often the only work. Now, running an office was a different skill not talked about much in my day at school, HOWEVER, I still think I wouldn't have "wasted" my law school time learning how to buy a printer. I had a better teacher for that, THE ABA and specifically the GP section and the LPM section. I bought their books and when they were in town, went to the seminars. Then when I could finally afford a computer, (those AT's were about 8k back then) I joined

the old ABA Net and hung around that for a while. Finally we are where we are. I still attend practice management programs. The prof's encouraged membership as a student, and they often were members too. I think most of my friends thought I was crazy when I came right out but I had had a year of clinic and a year at the Legal Aid Society while I waited to get admitted so I had the training, learned how to get the clients and well, I am still here.

Anthony Colleluori

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My school offered a course entitled "Law Practice Management" and it was for students who wanted to start a solo practice. Each week, they had a presenter who was a solo practitioner and covered a different topic but mostly marketing the practice and management of the practice. It was a great course and it did help a lot when I started my own practice. I took that class my last year in law school. Also, the career services has a book of "mentors." Basically, alumns that are willing to help out new practitioners and it is a great resource. Maria-Florencia Vidano

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I'm sorry to come to this thread late, but I just hadn't time earlier in the week.

I wish that my law school had the course that Maria-Florencia describes. I went to John Marshall in Chicago, which is a "2nd" or "3rd" tier law school- I never paid much attention to those labels, other than to know that I didn't want some ivory tower law school (and probably couldn't have afforded it anyway).

I wanted to stay away from the ivory tower because I knew before I started that I would be going out on my own, for several reasons: 1) soul not for sale 2) didn't feel like working for someone else's retirement (I was never good at taking orders, even as a child) 3) my wife's retail business demands too much of my time to be on someone else's schedule (see #2)

JMLS turns out a lot of real, working attorneys, and many judges in this area. The most practical coursework for going solo was "Legal Writing" which was much more than just writing, but all the nuts and bolts of research, drafting etc. The class was required for two full years for everyone, a very good thing. The most important class for going solo was the last one, where a bona fide practicing attorney walked us through some stuff you really need on your own, including writing a basic motion, a demand letter and the associated pleadings to get you to a default judgment in collections, a will, and engagement and termination of rep letters.

I must give huge kudos to Doc Pollack who taught that class AND gave us samples of a bunch of his own documents to use and build on. He also offered to lend an ear if we ever needed a bit of aid when starting out. I'm glad I got his section, because I don't know if the other instructors were as helpful and confidence building. So yes and no, law school did prepare me somewhat. Could there have been more, sure, but I always felt that we got a pretty good start for practicing at John Marshall.



Phillip J. Laurin

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Actually, JMLS is a 4th tier school - in the Chicago area N'western, U of I and U of C are 1st tier, Loyola & Chicago-Kent are 2nd tier, and NIU and DePaul are 3rd tier. Unfortunately, as I found, stupid as it is, that actually matters. I'm a Loyola grad, and, like so many others here, I can say that my answer to the question posed is a resounding 'NO!' Chicago-Kent requires legal writing all three years (Loyola does not; it only requires it for the first 3 semesters); the last year is essentially transactional writing. I think that this is a great idea, especially since you'll be expected to have certain skills upon graduation, such as how to write a contract. Of course, what most people do is simply copy another contract and modify where necessary. But that assumes you have a contract lying around that you can use as a model. My career services office was useless. In fact, the Dean was recently let go. {Except for the top graduates of my class, most of my classmates are working beneath themselves - working as a glorified law clerk, working part-time, or doing something non-law related - in order to pay their loans off.} How useless was career services? Well, they called me about 6 months after graduation, and asked if I was working. When I replied 'no', they - honest to God - suggested I try monster.com, careerbuilder.com and the ISBA and CBA job boards. As if I hadn't already thought of that! What they DIDN'T do was offer useful suggestions, or any form of mentoring. Thus, it was no surprise to hear of the Dean's termination, nor is it any surprise for me to hear that none of my law school classmates ever intends to donate a dime to the school. I graduated in May of 2005 - at the apparently (from what I've read on this thread) tender age of 39 - and to date I still don't have a law firm job. At this point, I'm resigned to being forcibly solo, and am trying to develop a plan to build a successful law practice. It's a little depressing, but I'm hopeful once I get clients I'll be happier than I would have been as a BigLaw slave. When I decided to go to law school, I got a lot of encouragement - "oh, with your background, you'll be in demand!" - but I soon found out reality was a different story. I've been fortunate enough to have some practicing attorneys answer my (sometimes stupid, sometimes basic) questions, which I can never thank them enough for. I found each and every one of those attorneys on the various boards that I am a member of, and I thank God every day that the people on this and the other boards are happy to help. I wouldn't change my mind about going to law school, but if I'd been a little smarter, I would have graduated with a better plan and stuck to it. Good luck.

Greg Zbylut

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I find it hard to believe that in this day and age, anyone would even want to go to BIGLAW. I have been re-reading my copy of Foonberg and with the advent of the internet and a little gumption, small/solo is the way to go. Back when I started, with nothing more than my wife/secretary and Jay's book on my desk, getting work was tough. Convincing quality clients to come to me with their work and take a chance was nearly impossible. It took years to build a book of business and I became a rainmaker out of sheer necessity. Now it is like shooting fish in a barrel, mostly. The advent of Findlaw, and Blogging, and legal listserve have made it possible for

guys like me to be as big as we want to be. As a result, I am happy as a clam being a lawyer. I look at people who wish they hadn't gone this route and try to dissuade others and shake my head. This is the best career I could possible have. I love it.

An example. I recently had a midsize company with a litigation mess come to me about a criminal prosecution on backdating options. The CEO and the Chief counsel (a law school buddy) came to me and asked what I knew about it. I told them, "only what I read about it in the papers.

I do however know how to question witnesses and ferret out discovery. I know the Criminal Procedure law better than any law school professor and the same with the evidence code. I am no slouch when it comes to SOX either." My classmate confirmed my self assessment which seemed to make his boss happy.(Made me feel pretty good too.)

They looked at my "small" office and commented on how 3 attorneys may not be enough to handle the case. I asked them about the other 50 lawyers my office has available and they looked at me in wonderment. Where are they? Is this a satellite office? "No. My 50 other attorneys are right in this little box" pointing to my computer.

"I will need a litigation budget of 500k I will be working with the best other criminal attorneys I want on the case. We will hold regular meetings (face to face thanks to webcams.) Our extranet will provide everybody with copies of evidence and pleadings. We will assign jobs based on what everybody does best and I will be in charge of the litigation."

The company is hiring us and saving nearly a Quarter Million on legal fees. As CEO's become younger they will understand the power of this internet far more than the old guys do. For example a funny thing is, that 2 of the lawyers we are using as consultants were BIGLAW guys the client interviewed and decided not to use because of price. They will consult and earn a decent fee paid based on the hours of work they actually provide. My job is to negotiate with the AUSA Attorney and to keep us in budget. I will head up the trial team but there will be three trial attorneys if it goes that way.

Finally, we will do as much work at my shop as we can, but I do in fact have the best and the brightest available to me right in the office and on the net.

Final note, I hired a brilliant kid who clerked for the best judge in the state, She writes like a charm and is a brilliant lawyer. She is going to be a great lawyer and will make partner here in the next 3-4 years. She is a Graduate of JMLS. In my opinion, if she is an example of what they turn out, they are in fact tier one.

Anthony Colleluori

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My law school has prepared me to be a solo, but since it's a 3rd or 4th tier, I don't have BIGLAW knocking down my door anyway. Being an insurance adjuster, I've seen BIGLAW and it looks too much like BIGINSURANCE and I'm not interested.

Oh, and thanks to John Kitch, another listmate here, I have my business plan, since he was the Law Office Management Instructor.

I think the Law Office Management class should be a required course.

N. Zale Dowlen, MBA (finishing law school this year...)

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Surely you jest. Of course, the fact that in my three years at Columbia, I knew a grand total of one student who went directly into solo practice may have something to do with it. At least among the so-called "national" law schools when I was attending school back in the Dark Ages, it was almost consider beneath them to actually teach students any practical skills. Probably the most cogent example I can think of is Irving Younger who went on to become a very highly admired lecturer on the CLE circuit. At least the scuttlebutt was that he was not granted tenure in large part because he had the audacity to suggest that Columbia might consider teaching a course of New York Civil Practice Law and Rules. Heaven forbid! How terribly demeaning.

Thankfully, things seem to be changing in law school. Indeed, I've been particularly impressed with some of the skills programs being offered at Pepperdine and Loyola Law Schools. But at least as far as practical skills being taught in law school back in my day, forgetaboutit. OTOH, I did take some very interesting courses in the Soviet legal system and other esoteric subjects which I've had virtually no occasion whatsoever to use in my practice, but that's another story.

Bob Merring

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I agree. Before becoming a solo, I worked for a medium sized law firm as an aviation insurance defense lawyer. The partner I worked for sent one of our employer-insurance companies ("Big Insurance" ) a letter notifying them that we were going to have to raise our hourly rates. (Note: for those who do not do ins. defense, the insured is the "client," the ins. co. is the "employer".) The ins. co. representative that we dealt with on his cases sent us back a letter saying that his company would not approve us raising our rates. Instead he suggested that we just increase the number of hours we billed for at the same rate (to make up the difference). And that's how ins. companies think. Of course I continued to bill at the old rate--and began thinking about going solo so as to not have to work for ins. co.'s.

Dick O'Connor

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