



Perspectives on Small Firm Life

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Law is not a one-size-fits-all profession. Some people thrive in firms with thousands of attorneys, but many others eschew big firm life and either join a smaller firm or start their own. Some would not have it any other way. Abraham Lincoln, for example, told his long-time law partner that he planned to return to Illinois after the Presidency, “and then we will go right on practising law as if nothing had ever happened.” Atlanta is fortunate to have a number of small firms who have managed to accomplish many large things. I was able to ask key figures at four of them—**Louis Cohan** (Cohan Law Group), **Matt Jordan** (The Law Offices of Benjamin Y. Gerber), **Jeb Butler** (Butler Tobin), and **Cheryl Legare** (Legare, Attwood & Wolfe)—the same five questions about their work. Their answers follow.

1 Tell me a little bit about your current practice—how long have you been there, how many (if any) other attorneys do you work with, etc.

Louis Cohan: After nearly 20 years in a bigger firm, I founded Cohan Law Group (CLG) five years ago with my trusty paralegal, **Shannon Clutter**. Today, we are located on the 25th floor of Tower Place. We have two Associates, Of Counsel (**Michael Dunham**) and two attorneys who share space in our offices. Shannon is still here because she is not allowed to leave! Our practices all intersect at business litigation. In addition, we have a heavy concentration in employment litigation. Mike Dunham also works in the areas of landlord/tenant and family law.

Matt Jordan: My current practice is primarily representing injured Georgia workers in pursuing workers’ compensation benefits. In that capacity, I

work in a small office with two other lawyers. In addition, I serve as a pro tempore judge in the Municipal Court of Athens, where I adjudicate Athens-Clarke County ordinance violations, State of Georgia misdemeanor traffic violations, including DUI, and State of Georgia misdemeanor crimes of Theft by Shoplifting, Possession of Less Than an Ounce of Marijuana, and Underage Possession of Alcohol. I also work as a private mediator in workers’ compensation disputes.

Jeb Butler: At Butler Tobin, we specialize in serious personal injury and wrongful death cases. My law partner, **Darren Tobin**, and I left our respective former firms and started our own in June of 2014. The size of Butler Tobin has varied some over our two years of existence, but right now we are sitting at two lawyers and two paralegals, which is a good size for us. It enables us to bounce ideas off each other and to make sure that, if a bad tendency is born, there is someone else around to correct it before it becomes habit. Having two staff members allows us to cross-staff our cases, so that neither Darren nor I work exclusively with one person. It also makes us big enough to ‘muscle up’ in the event that a corporate defendant foolishly attempts to outwork us.

Cheryl Legare: My two law partners, **Eleanor Atwood** and **Steve Wolfe**, and I founded our firm, Legare, Attwood & Wolfe, in May 2015. We are an employment litigation boutique representing employees in all aspects of employment law, including claims of disability discrimination and retaliation, sexual harassment, FMLA interference and retaliation, gender, pregnancy, race, religion, national origin, and age discrimination, and wage and hour disputes. We also represent individuals in contract negotiations and employment separation negotiations.

2 What helped you realize that “big” firm life was not where you wanted to be?

Louis Cohan: I think I am a bit of a control freak. I am also entrepreneurial. I have never really thought that I would be well suited to life in Big Law. Since starting CLG, it is apparent that even going from 50 attorneys in my prior firm to our current structure is very rewarding for me. If we have a soft month or two, it is on me. If we have a big win, the impact is significant. The direct relationship between performance and outcome is very real and rewarding.

Matt Jordan: I left a very well-respected mid-size litigation firm to move to a small firm. That firm was great to me and still is a wonderful firm, but the ‘corporate’ culture that it inevitably created when you have over 100 lawyers plus support staff can be overwhelming. I realized I wanted to have more say in the day-to-day operation of the firm and my practice.

Jeb Butler: Well, I tried it. To be fair, I was pretty sure from the outset that I was not going to end up working in a skyscraper—in part because I do not derive much satisfaction from assisting the already-empowered and in part because I do not like parking garages. But I spent part of a summer working for Troutman Sanders, and although I admired the firm and liked the folks I worked with, it did not take long to figure out that I would rather attack powerful interests than represent them.

Cheryl Legare: When I worked at my last large firm, I realized that churning hours working for corporations was not where my heart was. I am grateful for my time at big firms because of the training (both substantive and law practice training) and the mentoring I received, but I much prefer running my own practice. I have so much more control over my life now.

3 What advice do you have for others thinking about starting their own firm or joining a “smaller” firm?

Louis Cohan: In the immortal words of Nike: Just do it! But do it after you learn how to practice for a minimum of 4–5 years. Law school does not ready most people to practice law without additional training. Also, you need time to build a practice and more important to build a reputation. In fact, I always tell young lawyers that from day one, you should be building your own practice. You should be developing your own clients. You should write and speak. You should be active in the legal community through bar associations, Inns of Court, Lawyer’s Club, etc. As you get to be 10 years into your career, your value as an attorney will be increasingly dependent on your ability to generate clients and work. It is too late if you wait to get started.

Matt Jordan: Be prepared to hustle. Getting business is tough and marketing is a 24/7 endeavor. I would also suggest having about a year’s salary in the bank to help cover living costs while the firm’s collections get up to speed.

Jeb Butler: Do it. It is the most fun you can have wearing a coat and tie.

Cheryl Legare: Do it!!! Before my partners and I created Legare, Attwood & Wolfe, I met with many attorneys who were at small firms and had started suc-

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successful solo practices to see what their day-to-day life was like. I wanted an idea of what I was getting myself into. I highly recommend this. Nobody ever refused to meet with me, and I gained invaluable advice. Also, be prepared for how the financial issues may impact you and your family. Operating a new business is a struggle in the beginning, but with persistence, a solid business plan and effort, it turns around quickly.

4 What has been the biggest obstacle you have faced as a result of the size of your practice?

Louis Cohan: Obstacle?! Well seriously, the only real obstacle for us is people who don't know better. What I mean is, there is tremendous talent in small law firms. Many of us have worked for, with, and against the biggest firms for years. Today, technology means we have resources to match any other firm. We can deliver our services at lower prices because our overhead is dramatically less expensive. Notwithstanding the above, there are people out there who will hire a bigger firm just because it is bigger. I mean no disrespect to our bigger firms who are competitors. Rather, I mean to suggest that the smartest, most sophisticated consumers of legal services choose based on talent and fit, rather than size, alone.

Matt Jordan: Personnel issues. When you work at a big firm, someone else handles HR. At my firm, we handle all of these issues ourselves. Finding and keeping good people can be a challenge, but we have been very lucky. Our staff is exceptional.

Jeb Butler: Dividing time between our medium-sized cases, which are our bread and butter, and larger cases that take more time but bring greater rewards. We work through the issue in two ways. First, when either Darren or I are working on a larger case that suddenly becomes very demanding, the other guy can step in and keep the wheels turning on the medium-sized cases that still need attention. Second, we partner with folks. It is a great joy to work with other people from other firms, and Darren and I are not shy at all splitting fees with other lawyers. We have done that with regularity in the two years that our firm has existed, and will continue to do it—either on cases that originate elsewhere and are brought to us, or on large cases that we originate.

Cheryl Legare: The biggest obstacle for me has been adjusting to not having associates to delegate some of

the more mundane (but important) tasks of a litigation practice. Dealing with vendors has been a learning experience, too. Do not get me started on what we went through to get our phones and Internet hooked up—.

5 What has surprised you the most about life in a smaller firm?

Louis Cohan: One of my favorite stories to tell about life in my smaller firm involved a settlement mediation. I was nearly 20 years into my practice when I started CLG. I had litigated and resolved many millions of dollars of cases before starting CLG. Notwithstanding, I had this pretty big case. We scheduled mediation and I represented six plaintiffs with a contingent fee arrangement. All the ingredients were in place to make possible a substantial settlement. That meant there was a lot of money at stake for me. Notwithstanding all of my prior experience and that I had been an equity partner for many years before founding CLG, I found myself feeling strange about having such a significant personal stake in the financial outcome of the mediation. The feeling was—surprising. I ended up hiring a trusted and more senior attorney (at no additional cost to the clients) to advise me during the mediation. I just wanted someone objective with no stake in the outcome to tell me if I needed to back off or push harder. It all worked out great and the mediation was a big success.

Matt Jordan: I have had a few. First, it is tough, hard work. When you work at a large firm, the clients are more institutional. Each of my clients is an injured worker who has no idea how the workers' compensation system operates and is afraid for their job and health. Also, the shift in how I spend my time has been quite surprising. When I first started practicing, I was keenly focused on the practice of law. Nowadays, I have gotten much more comfortable with that aspect of my practice and spend much more time on marketing and helping to address the business side of a small firm.

Jeb Butler: How fast time goes.

Cheryl Legare: I am surprised, although I should not be, at just how much I love it. I have the same amount of work, but it is different because I am in control. I have managed to find a balance between work and life that I never had when I was working for other people. I have never been happier in my legal career. ■