



## FINDING A NEW NICHE

This article tells the story of my transition from law firm associate to self-employed contract attorney. My transition is not yet complete because, even though I intend to continue in this work for a long time, I know that I will do other work that I have yet to discover.

Three years ago, I worked for a mid-sized Portland litigation firm. I handled all aspects of cases appropriate for my experience and assisted partners on larger and more complex cases. While a mid-level associate, I became pregnant with my son. At that time, I was sure I would return to work after a standard three-month maternity leave. Then, as the pregnancy progressed and I learned more about what to expect about life after a baby, I became less sure. I knew that I would want more time with my child than a harried hour or two in the morning and an exhausted hour or two in the evening. So, when the time came, my firm and I amicably parted ways.

I took a total of six months off work after my son was born. Already tied to the demands of an infant, I was not eager to tie myself to the demands of firm life as well. Therefore, I decided to pursue contract work. I told everyone I knew and everyone I met that I was taking assignments. I researched the going hourly rates, set mine and then lowered them, and then raised them as I obtained work and gained experience. I found mentors in two more experienced contract attorneys who also had once worked in firms. They taught me the business side of contracting, gave me encouragement to stick with it when work was slow, and sent me referrals.

I worked out of my home office (and still do), and arranged child care for my son during my working hours. I gradually acquired a laptop computer and copier/fax machine. I use the Westlaw and Lexis accounts of the firms that hire me. Clients and opposing counsel call me at home and occasionally

hear the ring of my son's laughter from downstairs. It is not a bad way to work.

During the first two years, I worked for 10 to 15 different attorneys, some with one or two discrete assignments and others with repeat business for several months at a time. In the last year, I have worked almost exclusively for two firms. I handle everything from initial case evaluation to discovery, depositions, motion practice, and court appearances. I've been assigned several arbitrations, but the cases ultimately settled. I pay my own PLF and OSB dues, and I found an affordable health insurance plan covering me and my son. My annual net income is comparable to an associate attorney's salary.

I thoroughly enjoy being self-employed. My strong independent streak helped me overcome the fear of going it alone. Once I took that step, I got control over my schedule and workload and the ability to live life on my own terms. My work as a contract lawyer provided steady family income during a time when my husband started his own business. Contract work also allows me to slow down or take time off when I'm feeling overextended or burned out and gives me the time and energy to pursue bar and leadership activities that I find fulfilling.

I'm not sure where this journey will end. Along the way, I hope contract work will take me through the pregnancy, infancy, and toddlerhood of a second child. Then, who knows? I have spent my whole life being certain of where I was going and what I was doing, and this is not what I had planned. Yet somehow it is liberating to be both in control of my work life and open to possibilities. If I chose to, I know I could go to work in a law firm, open my own firm, or work in the business, government, or nonprofit sectors. I will be taking time to consider the possibilities – and keeping my mind and options open.

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