

Lightening the load: How professional employer organizations are helping small, solo law firms

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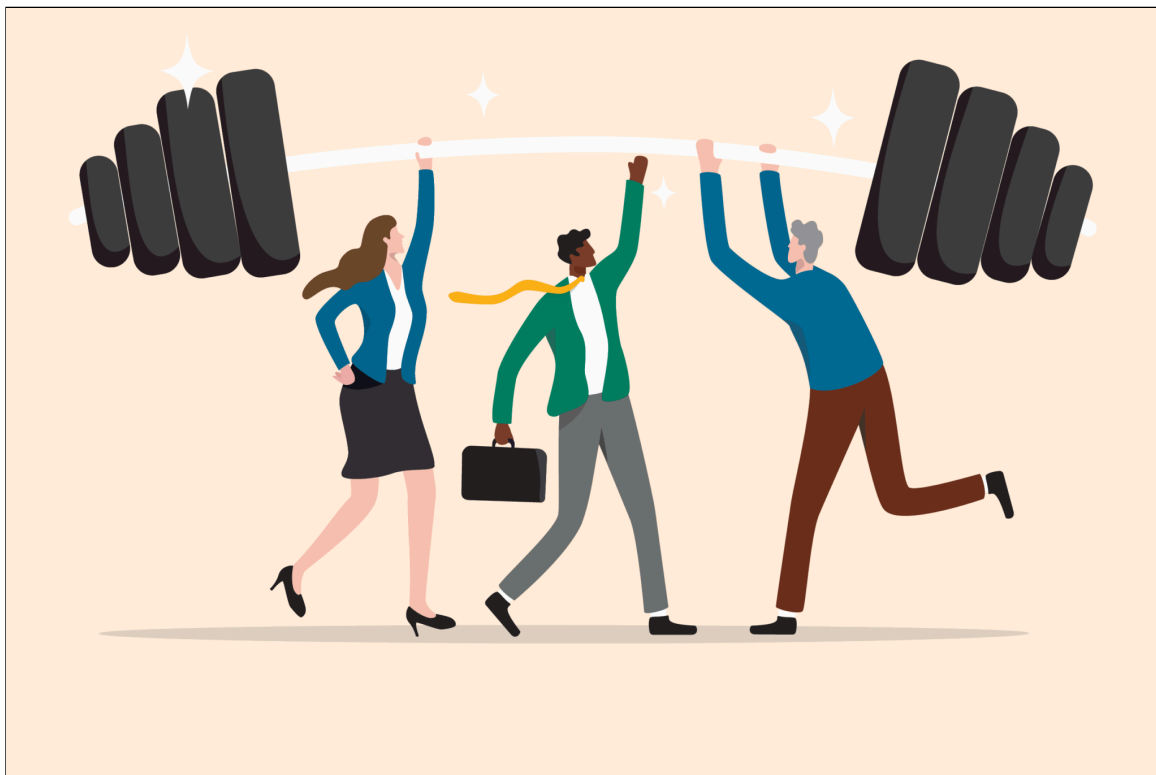
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For any lawyer, the maintenance of a law firm is just as important as the practice itself. But for the owners of small and solo firms, the maintenance can overtake the practice, leading to too many hours spent on administrative tasks.

More businesses are popping up in Indiana and across the country to help law firms and others alleviate the stress.

“I started as a lawyer and realized the massive headaches and inefficiencies that come with trying to run a small firm. And was like, ‘I can solve that problem.’ So I fixed my problem [and] now want to share that fix with other people,” said Cory Sprunger,

managing partner at Sprunger & Sprunger Attorneys at Law and owner of Sprunger Alliance, a professional employer organization in Berne.

Sprunger and his team built Sprunger Alliance out of a need they saw firsthand.

The Sprunger & Sprunger law firm was established a little over a decade ago. After building the firm to include several small firms across northeast Indiana, Sprunger said he noticed an interesting phenomenon: many of his attorneys were billing more than double the hours lawyers were averaging statewide.



Cory Sprunger

According to the 2024 Legal Trends Report published by Clio, a legal technology platform based in Vancouver, lawyers spend an average of 2.9 hours each workday on billable work.

About three years ago, Sprunger realized why. Though his attorneys worked at small firms, they didn't have to perform administrative tasks themselves, unlike attorneys at other small firms.

From there, SprungerPEO, now Sprunger Alliance, was born.

Sprunger Alliance

Sprunger Alliance provides law firms assistance in handling administrative needs, like payroll, IT, and bookkeeping. Law firms can choose to contract with Sprunger to run individual services, like bulk mail campaigns and budget management, or request service bundles, giving Sprunger full reign of administrative tasks.

Through partnerships with different vendors, the business offers discounts on several services.

"When you go to build a house, you go and hire a general contractor, instead of going and hiring an electrician and a plumber and a HVAC...we're like the general contractor coming and putting it all under one roof," he said.

Eileen Maguire became the sole owner of her law firm and said she felt overwhelmed by the maintenance of it until she discovered Sprunger Alliance.

"It was a godsend, because I had been using a part-time bookkeeper to help me kind of transition with the other partner leaving. And I was like, 'maybe I'll just have to do this all myself,'" she said.

When she first enlisted Sprunger for help, she used their IT services to transition her practice from an office space to her home. And when her bookkeeper retired, she brought in Sprunger for additional help.

Now, she credits Sprunger Alliance with handling aspects of her law firm she struggled to address in the past.

Sprunger said he enjoys the business side of operating a firm, but he knows not every attorney does. He sees Sprunger Alliance as a way for small businesses to work together

to tackle administrative tasks, rather than figuring it out alone.

The business now serves about 100 firms in Indiana and, more recently, around the country.

FullStack PEO

The use of PEOs appears to be on the rise across the country, according to data from the National Association of Professional Employer Organizations.

In a 2023 report, the association found that PEOs have grown an average of 7.5% annually since 2008.

Data also shows the benefit these organizations bring to small businesses. Data gathered between Jan. 1, 2023, and Jan. 1, 2024, showed that clients who used PEOs grew their businesses more than twice as high as employers who didn't use them during the year.

Indianapolis-founded FullStack PEO is another professional employer organization providing administrative support to businesses across the country. Dawn Lively-Jenkins, CEO and co-founder of the organization, said that while FullStack offers human resource assistance to different kinds of businesses, it's found a noticeable clientele in law firms.



Dawn Lively-Jenkins

In addition to lightening a load for their clients, Lively-Jenkins said another appeal to using a professional employer organization is to reduce the cost of paying additional staff, especially when firm dynamics change.

"We're not somebody that's been doing this as an office manager for them for 22 years that, when they get bought out, we're going to be out of a job now. We're a business partner, and that's pretty appealing, depending on what the law firm's ultimate goal is," she said.

Like at Sprunger, clients contact FullStack for a variety of situations. While the business can help firms that are comfortable with their small staff, it also serves clients metamorphosing into new ventures.

"It's an interesting situation sometimes when partnerships end and, you know, trying to help [law firms] get their footing under them, so that whomever they're going to be recruiting in the future, they have the same benefits and structure and everything from the HR perspective that other well-established firms already have," she said.

Many law firms praise professional employer organizations like Sprunger Alliance and FullStack PEO for being readily available, easy to use, and helpful throughout a law firm's lifespan.

"They take the time to help you understand what you're doing from the HR perspective so you can think forward," said Ray Biederman, a partner at Indianapolis-based Mattingly, Burke, Cohen, & Biederman and one of FullStack's clients. •