

TAKING THE SOLO PLUNGE

Big-Firm and Corporate Refugees
Like the Autonomy More Than the Security

MARGARET GRAHAM TEBB

SOME SOLOS ARE EXPRESSING SURPRISE at a recent survey showing 93 percent of corporate and big-firm lawyers have no interest in going solo. But they disagree on whether the percentage is too low or too high.

The survey by Robert Half Legal, a placement service for lawyers and paralegals, polled 200 lawyers at some of the largest law firms and corporations in the U.S. and Canada, according to the firm's Web site. Mark Del Bianco says he thinks the 93 percent on the

survey should be even higher. The Kensington, Md., solo and self-described big-firm refugee says many of his colleagues thought he had gone a bit daft when he announced his intent to leave his former Washington, D.C.-based firm for the solo life.

But for Del Bianco, the choice was obvious. The firm was phasing out its telecommunications practice, an area of the law he loves. "There really wasn't much choice if I wanted to continue this kind of work," he says. "I knew I'd be giving up the prestige of the big firm, but I knew I'd gain a lot more autonomy in return."

Del Bianco knew some clients would follow him, and he had a good idea where he would find future work. Now, up to a third of his client base is startup firms, a segment he rarely got to serve while working in the big firm. He finds that he loves helping a company build from scratch.

Saundra M. Gumerove, on the other hand, thinks that 93 percent is absurdly high. The Jericho, N.Y., solo says she thinks that many large-firm lawyers would leave if they had what it takes to make it as a solo.

"There's a certain group of people who need the security of the paycheck, the benefits," Gumerove says. "Then there are people who define themselves by their position. Their whole ego is tied up in their job title and the prestige associated with all of that."

FREEDOM IS KEY

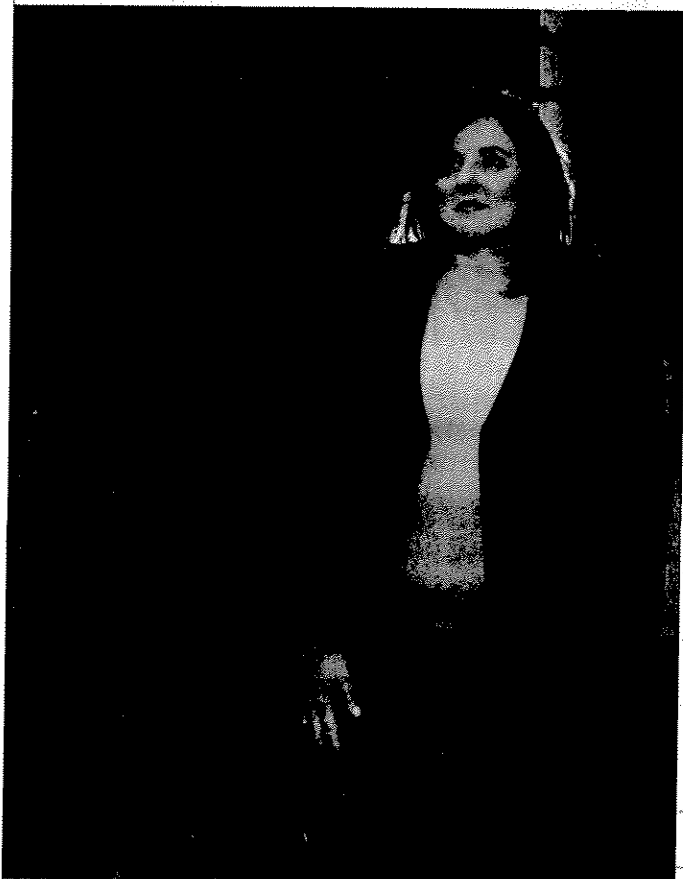
GUMEROVE ONCE HAD A CORPORATE LAW CAREER THAT included stints as vice president and counsel of a major finance company and general counsel at an insurance firm. She left to start a practice that allows her more freedom to be with her children. Her older daughter is developmentally disabled and has a seizure disorder.

"My bosses at both companies were very supportive, but I felt there was some resentment from my lateral colleagues," Gumerove says. "When I'd get called to leave early because my daughter was having a seizure, I sometimes felt like they thought I was getting away with something."

In addition, she says, her corporate offices were in Manhattan, an hour by train from her Long Island home. Now, with an office in her house, Gumerove can work at odd hours to spend more time with her children. She represents closely held corporations in financial transactions, and has also developed a niche practice in special education law and life planning for families of disabled individuals, based on her experiences with her daughter.

Walter D. James III agrees that more people might like to go solo than the Robert Half survey suggests, but they don't know how to make a go of it. James left a big Dallas firm to open his own shop practicing environmental law in nearby Grapevine, Texas, because, he says, he was "tired of other people deciding what my compensation should be."

James wrote a business plan and discovered that he could bill one-third fewer hours per month at a lower hourly rate and still make more money than he made as a partner at the big firm. ■



Saundra Gumerove's home office allows her more time to spend with her kids.

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