
PROFIT, PRECISION, AND FLEXIBILITY: How Freelance Attorneys Strengthen Law Firms at Every Stage

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The legal industry is in the midst of a profound transformation. As client expectations rise and economic pressures intensify, law firms are rethinking how they deliver legal services. Traditional staffing models—built on fixed overhead and long-term commitments—are giving way to more agile, efficient approaches that allow firms to remain competitive while enhancing client service, rather than sacrificing quality. A shortage of new associates has compounded an already difficult legal market.

One of the most impactful, yet often underutilized, strategies in this shift is integrating freelance attorneys into a law practice. Once viewed as a temporary solution for overflow work, law firms now recognize freelance lawyers as an ongoing, strategic asset. Whether navigating a sudden influx of cases, expanding into new practice areas, or managing unpredictable workflow, law firms are increasingly turning to experienced freelance attorneys to provide targeted support exactly when and where it is needed.

Today's freelance attorneys—often alumni from top law firms, government, or in-house roles—offer high-level legal support that helps firms scale efficiently, access specialized expertise, reduce burnout, and boost profitability without long-term overhead.

1. Increase Profitability Without Increasing Overhead

When business is booming, most law firms consider hiring associates to keep up with client demands. Hiring a full-time associate can feel like a big leap—especially if the timing isn't quite right or the ideal candidate hasn't surfaced. Post-pandemic, many law firms in California report having a difficult time finding good associates who want full-time, in-office work. Even if a firm is lucky enough to hire the perfect candidate, hiring a full-time associate also comes with considerable overhead—salary, benefits, office space, training, and more. Also, what happens to a firm financially when multiple cases settle at once or the calendar suddenly clears?

In contrast, freelance attorneys offer a flexible, cost-effective solution. They enable law firms to take on additional work when client demand increases, without the long-term financial commitment of a permanent hire. A freelance lawyer can even help train a permanent hire. Since freelance lawyers are paid only for the hours they work, firms often realize greater profitability per matter, particularly on project-based or overflow assignments.

A common misconception is that law firms cannot mark up the freelance attorney's rate—for example, paying the freelance lawyer \$150 per hour but billing the client \$350. In reality, California law is clear that law firms have several ethical options when it comes to

billing their clients for freelance legal services. Specifically, a firm may: (1) absorb the cost; (2) pass through the cost at the same rate paid to the freelance lawyer; (3) mark up the cost and charge the client a higher rate; or (4) bill the client a flat fee. All four approaches are ethical in California, provided the fee is not otherwise unconscionable under Rule 1.5 of the California Rules of Professional Conduct.

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(See Cal. Bus. & Prof. Code §§ 6147–6148, 6068(m); ABA Formal Ethics Op. 2000-420, stating, “A surcharge to the costs may be added by the billing lawyer if the total charge represents a reasonable fee for services provided to the client.”)

Freelance lawyers offer a profitable bridge between being overwhelmed and hiring permanently—helping firms manage overflow, maintain client service, and earn significant profit on each hour billed.

2. Access Specialized Expertise On-Demand

Many law firms seek to grow by expanding

into new practice areas or enhancing their capabilities in existing ones. Niche legal issues—such as tax questions, healthcare regulatory matters, or trademark disputes—can arise unexpectedly in ongoing matters. In these moments, freelance lawyers provide a powerful solution. Many freelance attorneys bring fifteen to twenty years of targeted experience from large law firms, government agencies, or in-house legal departments—many times with Big Law pedigrees. Their deep knowledge in niche areas allows law firms to immediately elevate the quality of their legal work. By tapping into a broad network of experienced freelance lawyers, law firms can access targeted expertise as needed and avoid turning away work or risking subpar representation.

This flexible access to focused talent not only supports business development and client retention, but it also helps firms meet their ethical obligations. Under California law, when a lawyer lacks sufficient experience in a particular area, they may still offer competent representation by consulting with a lawyer who possesses the necessary experience. Rule 1.1 of the California Rules of Professional Conduct states: “If a lawyer does not have sufficient learning and skill when the legal services are undertaken, the lawyer nonetheless may provide competent representation by . . . associating with or, where appropriate, professionally consulting another lawyer whom the lawyer reasonably believes to be competent.”

The outdated stereotype that contract lawyers are newly licensed and limited to document review no longer applies. Today's freelance attorneys are seasoned professionals who provide sophisticated legal insight and strategic support, enhancing a law firm's performance and enabling future growth in that practice area.

3. Reduce Stress and Improve Work-Life Balance for Your Team

Burnout is real. Not just for law firm partners tasked with client management, billing, and business development, but for their associates too. A 2025 survey by the American Lawyer confirmed that while there has been some recent improvement, 33% of lawyers are depressed, 68.7% have anxiety, and 65.5% felt

that billable hour pressures were “negatively impacting their mental health.” Recent billable rate hikes contribute to stress because clients—many now paying top dollar—expect “more of their counsel when it comes to their time and availability.” Staci Zaretsky, *Mental Health May Be Improving for Lawyers, But Severe Stressors Remain—And They’re Getting Worse*, Above the Law (May 14, 2025), <https://abovethelaw.com/2025/05/mental-health-may-be-improving-for-lawyers-but-severe-stressors-remain-and-theyre-getting-worse/>.

Law can often feel like a 24/7 endeavor. Clients are the lifeblood of any law firm, and lawyers must be responsive to their needs, often at inconvenient times. But lawyers are also human beings and can only do so much. When workload gets heavy, lawyers can feel overwhelmed and stressed. Freelance lawyers can take the edge off for law firm partners and their overworked associates and staff. Most lawyers have that one task (or several) that they simply do not love doing. Maybe drafting a discovery motion sounds like a tedious chore, or there’s a pile of commercial agreements mounting on the back burner. Freelance lawyers can handle these tasks so law firm lawyers can better attend to their clients’ needs while simultaneously reducing stress.

Delegating routine or time-consuming tasks to freelance lawyers can help your permanent team focus on high-level strategy, client relationships, and what they do best. The result? Happier attorneys, better retention, and a more sustainable culture. Integrating freelance attorneys into a firm’s staffing strategy can help distribute workloads more evenly among full-time staff, reducing burnout and improving retention.

4. Scale Smart—Especially During Growth Spurts or Busy Seasons

Freelance lawyer platforms have often been called “law firm accordion companies”—explaining how freelance lawyers enable law firms to expand like an accordion when there is a surge in client demand, but fold back up when the work is complete. Joan C. Williams, Aaron Platt, and Jessica Lee, *Disruptive Innovation: New Models of Legal Practice*, 67 UC Law SF L.J. 1 (2015).

Whether a law firm is taking on a major case, experiencing a surge in client demand, or navigating parental leaves, freelance lawyers offer a flexible solution. Highly experienced and well-qualified freelance attorneys—whether this means one, two, or ten-plus lawyers at a time—can join a legal team temporarily when workflow increases. Unfortunately, law firms

often make mistakes that can leave the law firm without the help they desperately need.

A costly mistake is waiting too long to bring on a freelance lawyer. The law firms that can scale quickly and effectively must have a plan in place. Best practices dictate a long-standing relationship with a freelance attorney, or two freelance attorneys, that handle one or two small tasks every week. This is the perfect opportunity for a law firm to offload its most dreaded (time consuming/repetitive/tedious) legal work to a freelance lawyer. When a law firm’s workload increases, those freelance lawyers are already familiar with the firm and have been getting steady work, so they are generally more able to ramp up when needed.

Another mistake is demanding an “on-call” lawyer. This model rarely works in practice because freelance lawyers are going to fill their available time with billable legal work, which means they may be unavailable during a law firm’s crunch time. But if that firm had been giving that same freelance lawyer steady work, then the freelance lawyer is generally more able to give more time when needed. See Montage Legal Group, *The Biggest Mistakes When Working with a Freelance Attorney*, Montage Legal Grp.: BigLaw to Freelance Law Blog (Apr. 7, 2025), <https://montagelegal.com/biggest-mistakes-when-working-with-a-freelance-attorney/>.

5. Deliver Better Service to Your Clients and Prevent Malpractice

Freelance lawyers help law firms meet deadlines, complete thorough research, and provide polished work product—especially when the team is stretched thin. Many reports confirm that solo practitioners and small firms face the highest number of malpractice claims in California, which makes sense since these lawyers tend to have less support staff to help during busy periods and are stretched thin more often than large law firm associates. Hellen Hong & Suma Mathai, *Dangerous Myths About Malpractice Insurance Coverage*, Cal. Law. Ass’n (Mar. 27, 2024), <https://calawyers.org/california-lawyers-association/dangerous-myths-about-malpractice-insurance-coverage/>.

Common causes of malpractice claims in California include missed deadlines, insufficient legal research resulting in inaccurate or outdated advice, and failure to thoroughly investigate a case. *Mistakes That Can Lead to Legal Malpractice Claims*, Century Law Group (May 24, 2022), <https://www.centurylawgroup.com/blog/mistakes-that-can-lead-to-legal-malpractice-claims/>. Notably, these mistakes often stem not from


incompetence, but from attorneys being overextended and unable to manage their caseloads effectively.

By engaging freelance legal support during peak periods, law firms can offload critical tasks—such as legal research, motion drafting, and discovery support—allowing them to meet deadlines, maintain high-quality work, and reduce the risk of professional liability. Rather than pushing through with limited capacity, law firms can proactively manage workload and client expectations by leveraging experienced freelance attorneys as-needed—ultimately strengthening their practice and mitigating malpractice exposure.

Law firm workloads can fluctuate, sometimes wildly. Freelance attorneys allow law firms to adapt to these fluctuations without the long-term commitment and financial obligations associated with full-time hires. This flexibility enables law firms to respond more efficiently to client needs, meet tight deadlines, and manage litigation surges or large-scale transactions. With the right support in place, law firms can consistently exceed client expectations.

Build a Resilient Law Practice

The legal industry is transforming how law firms staff and deliver legal services. Freelance attorneys play a critical role in this shift, offering law firms a practical and strategic way to increase agility, reduce costs, and enhance service delivery. By integrating freelance attorneys into their business model, law firms can remain competitive and better equipped to meet the demands of modern legal practice.

Freelance attorneys are no longer a “nice to have”—they’re a strategic advantage for modern law firms. Whether a law firm is a solo practice or a larger, growing firm, incorporating freelance lawyer support can free up partner and associate time, expand firm capabilities, and ultimately help build a more agile, resilient practice. 

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