



Stephanie Cook

Dan Smith

When bigger isn't better >

By **Bobbi A. Hoffman**

For Cooper Youell, it was his entrepreneurial spirit. James Creekmore wanted to focus more on client needs and less on billable hours. Stephanie Cook needed more control over her career and more balance in her life. Their reasons for leaving larger law firms to strike out on their own differ, but the common denominator among three

Executive Summary:

TV shows like Boston Legal and L.A. Law would have us believe that large law firms—with powerful partners and competitive associates—are sexy and exciting. But for some attorneys, smaller is better.

Roanoke Valley-based attorneys was their desire to call their own shots.

After nine years at Gentry Locke Rakes & Moore, Cooper Youell, 42, was a contract partner with a practice in commercial law. He'd always wanted to be his own boss, and as he progressed toward equity partnership, he decided it was time to strike out on his own.

He opened Whitlow & Youell PLC, with Mike Whitlow in September of 2007. "It wasn't an easy decision, but the change has been one that I'm very happy with," says Youell. He likes being the decision maker.

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It's about balancing my family with work.

—Stephanie Cook

Was a move risky? Youell jokes that he knew he could "flip burgers" if he had to. He misses the camaraderie with his former co-workers. His work hours are comparable, but different. Instead of attending meetings, he deals with accounting and administrative functions.

“I’m a business owner now,” Youell says. “When you’re the person who has to make sure the ship stays afloat, you pay a little more attention to the condition of the oars, whereas at Gentry Locke, I didn’t even see the oars.”

(Youell’s wife, Cabell, was also a corporate lawyer for a number of years, but she followed her heart a couple of years ago and became executive director of the St. Francis of Asisi.)

James Creekmore, 40, opened the Creekmore Law Firm in Daleville in February of 2006. Prior to that, he worked at Woods Rogers for 10 years and LeClair Ryan for one. Creekmore practices intellectual property law. The worldwide demand for his specialty made Creekmore’s move less risky and led him to open a second office last month with two attorneys in Blacksburg.

In larger firms, “it becomes very difficult, regardless of the intent of the law firm, for the attorneys to maintain a true balance and quality of life,” says Creekmore. “The more responsibility I got—and I loved the responsibility, I loved what I did—it became all-encompassing. It was 24/7, 365 days a year.”

Creekmore now works 30-40 percent fewer hours and enjoys his ability to telecommute.

“I don’t have a billable hour requirement. With a very small firm, I can focus on the clients’ needs.”

For Stephanie Cook, 39, even a three-partner firm was too big. Cook found herself the only associate and only female attorney at what was Carter Osborne & Miller. “I had no control over what was happening,” she says.

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It becomes very difficult... for the attorneys to maintain a true balance and quality of life.

—James Creekmore

Cook also cites a lack of support and training. “There was no way I could advance.”

After three years, she left and opened Stephanie Pitsenberger Cook, PC, in December 2006. She specializes in estate administration and planning, which made her move riskier: Once an estate is completed, there is rarely additional work. Flexibility is paramount to Cook.

“For me, it’s about balancing my family with work that’s important,” says Cook. Though she works more hours, Cook says she gets more done, and she doesn’t have to account to someone for her billable hours. “I don’t have to ask for time off to take my kids to the doctor.”

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It wasn’t an easy decision.

—Cooper Youell



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