

PRACTICE MANAGEMENT

Practicing Solo

“Practicing Solo” features interviews with our industry’s new and seasoned sole practitioners. If you are itching to join the solo ranks, or striving to be more efficient and effective in your established one-person firm, this column offers practical advice, steeped in experience from the trenches, that can move you forward.

By Rod P. Burkert, CPA, CVA

Interview: David Solis

I hope you enjoyed the January/February interview with Ben Towne. Our interview series continues, with this issue featuring David Solis.

Snapshot:

My credentials: CVA, MAFF
I’m located in: Mill Creek, Washington (greater Seattle area)
On my own since: January 2017
Name of my firm (and website URL): Solis Financial Forensics LLC (www.solisff.com)
My practice sweet spot is: Litigation consulting
Typical size case I deal with: Cases with damages in the five- to nine-figure range.



David Solis

I still loved math and physics, though, so I decided I would switch to a double major in those subjects. I did that for a few quarters, but then found myself wondering what I would actually do for a career as a math and physics major. I didn’t think I would enjoy any of the options.

At this point, I’m starting my junior year and getting a bit nervous. I tried architecture for one quarter, not realizing how much art skill was involved. (I’m terrible at art.) So that was a bust. Finally, one of my fraternity brothers, who was in a similar position with deciding on his major, suggested we both give economics a try. To my surprise, I ended up loving the subject and did really well in it. I stayed with economics and was set to graduate with a Bachelor of Science degree in economics in June 2007 of my senior year.

Rod: The BVFLS profession isn’t exactly a calling. Tell us about your background and how you got to where you are today.

David: I’ll start from the beginning. I was a math and physics person growing up and always thought I would hate anything related to finance, economics, or accounting. In seventh grade, I decided I wanted to be an aerospace engineer and went to college with the intention of becoming one. I entered the University of Washington as a preengineering major and took math, physics, and engineering courses. I did pretty well, and things seemed to be moving in the direction I planned. Then, I failed my first computer science course. That turned out to be a blessing in disguise because it made me think about whether I actually wanted to be an aerospace engineer. After a lot of thought and reflection, I decided that wasn’t my career path.

It was the end of winter quarter of my senior year and although I didn’t know what I was going to do with an economics degree, I was overly confident that I would figure it out. All I knew was that I was really enjoying my courses and that there had to be something out there for me.

My friend who convinced me to try economics decided he was going to move out of the fraternity at the end of winter quarter and asked me to help him. I did and ended up meeting his father. We chatted a lot and I gave his father my background and filled him in on how I got to where I was. My friend chimed in about how good I was with math and numbers (I had a reputation for helping and tutoring friends in math). His father told me that he owned a firm that performed forensic economic services (I was completely clueless as to what that was) and offered me a job on the spot. Not knowing what else I was going to do, I said yes.

I started at Mueller & Partin, PS, Inc. as a forensic economist in June 2007, one week after I graduated. I still had no idea what a forensic economist was or what they did. But I started to “get it” shortly after beginning work.

I left Mueller in October 2015 to take a position as a manager in the forensic, economic, and valuation services group at Berntson Porter & Company, a midsize accounting firm in the Seattle area. I was there for a little more than a year and realized that I was ready to venture out on my own. I left Berntson Porter in January 2017 to start Solis Financial Forensics LLC.

Rod: What was your first year like, and what would have made it better?

David: In December 2016, when I was considering starting my own practice, my pregnant wife was a first grade teacher and was a few months away from going on unpaid maternity leave. We had just depleted our savings and taken on a mortgage to buy our house. I was proposing to quit my job and start my own practice from the ground up. Every single family member, friend, and colleague thought I was crazy. I decided to go for it anyway, and there was a lot of pressure.

I was very fortunate to have obtained exceptional experience and developed good relationships with attorneys from working at Mueller. And so, my first solo year ended up being better than I had planned. Don’t get me wrong, though. It was no walk in the park. There were many trials and tribulations, but I was able to learn so much through them and come out stronger because of them. I honestly can’t think of something I would have changed to make my first year better.

Rod: Did you have a formal (or even semiformal) business plan?

David: I did. I am a planner by nature. Prior to launch, I had researched all the necessary costs, developed multi-scenario financial projections, researched and prepared for all of the regulatory issues, engaged someone to do my business logo, learned how to create my own website, and started developing my own formats for engagement letters, analyses, reports, etc.

Rod: Do you practice in a specialized niche today?

David: Yes. I primarily focus on litigation consulting. I do some nonlitigation business valuation work, but the majority of those projects still fall within the context of litigation.

Rod: What has been your best marketing tactic?

David: Honestly, no marketing has been my best marketing tactic. When I started my practice, I did focus some resources towards marketing. But I’ve found that the overwhelming majority of my work comes from referrals and word of mouth. So, I actually don’t focus any resources on marketing anymore. [Rod’s note: So, actually, David’s best marketing tactic is doing good work!]

Rod: How do you price your work?

David: I price my work by the hour. I don’t do any fixed-fee work.

Rod: Where do you get your “runner’s high” from: (1) getting the work (e.g., practice development), (2) doing the work (e.g., an intellectually challenging analysis), or (3) delivering the work (e.g., reviewing a report with a client)?

I’ve found that the overwhelming majority of my work comes from referrals and word of mouth. So, I actually don’t focus any resources on marketing anymore.



David recently moved his office to space one mile from his home to "be close to home...and reduce his carbon footprint."

getting my work done, QuickBooks for bookkeeping, and Harvest for tracking my time and billing.

Rod: What do you listen to while you work?

David: I prefer to work in silence. Every now and then I'll need a little change and will play some classical music on Spotify.

Rod: How do you keep track of what you have to do?

David: Outlook. Outlook. Outlook. (See above!)

Rod: Early bird or night owl—what's your sleep routine?

David: I'm a little bit of both, at least compared to my wife (I go to bed after her and get up before her). I usually go to bed between 10:00 p.m. and 10:30 p.m. Unless I'm not very busy at work, I'll get up at 5:00 a.m. and exercise. I do breakfast with my kids, who usually get up around 6:30 a.m. I hand the baton off to my wife once she's done with her morning routine, and then I'm off to the office.

Rod: Do you have liability insurance?

David: Yes. I use Hiscox.

Rod: Do you have any office/admin staff?

David: No. I'm 100 percent solo.

Rod: So, who reviews your work?

David: I do. Generally, before I send off a final report, I will let it sit for at least 24 hours without looking at it or thinking about it. Once I feel comfortable that I have a fresh set of eyes, I'll come back to it and review the text and calculations.

Rod: Do you have a support group to call on for technical advice, etc.?

David: I have a close group of colleagues whom I stay in touch with. We contact each other for advice or to chat about what's going on in the industry.

David: Delivering the work is definitely where I get my "runner's high."

Rod: How do you differentiate yourself from larger firms?

David: I don't try to differentiate myself from larger firms, at least not in any direct way. I focus more on differentiating the quality of and detail involved in my work.

Rod: Do you work from a home office or an "office" office? Why?

David: I have a home office, but I primarily work from an "office" office. With a four-year-old and a two-year-old, it is difficult to focus at home. That being said, I just moved my office (effective January 1st) to space one mile away from my home. I wanted to be closer to home, to be able to walk/run/bicycle to and from work, and to reduce my carbon footprint.

Rod: What is your current mobile device?

David: I currently use the iPhone 12 Pro Max. I'm a sucker for having the latest iPhone.

Rod: Describe your current computer/workstation setup.

David: I use my Microsoft Surface Laptop 3 with an extra wide monitor.

Rod: Besides your phone and computer, what apps, gadgets, or tools can't you work without?

David: Outlook is the tool I cannot live without. Not only do I heavily rely on my email, calendar, and reminders, but having them sync across all my devices (computers, iPhone, Apple Watch) is crucial. My operations would come to a halt without Outlook. Then, Microsoft OneDrive, Excel, and Word are also crucial for

Rod: How do you stay technically current with changes in the profession?

David: I try to attend the major NACVA conferences and read *The Value Examiner* and *QuickRead* regularly. Those two publications tend to be very helpful for me.

Rod: What non-BVFLS book have you read most recently or want to get to, and why?

David: I'm currently reading (listening to) *A Promised Land*, by Barack Obama.

Rod: How do you recharge? What do you do when you want to forget about work?

David: Prior to COVID, my first answer would have been traveling or doing long weekend getaways with my family. Right now, I find myself focusing more on smaller things. The one that comes to mind is how excited I am to walk through the door at home after being at the office all day. My kids get super excited and my wife does too because I take them off her hands before dinner. However brief it may be, we're all very happy. I find a lot of joy in these small but significant occurrences.

Rod: What are the biggest practice challenges you face as a sole practitioner?

David: The biggest challenge is wearing multiple hats. Not only am I doing the analyses, writing the reports, and potentially testifying, but I'm doing my scheduling, preparing engagement letters, originating case files, doing the bookkeeping, taking care of administrative tasks, staying up to date with the industry, etc. It's logistically challenging to manage everything.

Rod: What (or where) are the biggest practice opportunities for someone going solo now?

David: Given the impact of COVID on businesses, I'd say bankruptcy work will see an increase in demand. For those who do bankruptcy work and have either recently gone solo or are thinking of going solo, I predict there will be a large need for your expertise.

Rod: What is the best work/life advice you have ever received?

David: I grew up in a single-parent household that financially struggled throughout my childhood. My mother always told me, "You need to work your @\$ off if you want a better life than this." Those words have stuck with me my whole life. I strive to work hard and put in the effort in all aspects of my life, whether it's work, family, leisure, health, etc.

Rod: Finish this sentence: If I knew then what I know now, I would...

David: ...have double-majored in economics and math. I love the degrees I have and work in those areas all the time. But I still love math, too.

That's a wrap! Answers have been lightly edited. Do you have a Practicing Solo issue you would like me to address? Email me at rod@rodburkert.com. **VE**



Rod P. Burkert, CPA, CVA, works with BVFLS practitioners who feel like they are working harder than they need to. Or who are not getting the results they feel they should be, given how hard they are working. If that's you, email him at rod@rodburkert.com.

For those who do bankruptcy work and have either recently gone solo or are thinking of going solo, I predict there will be a large need for your expertise.