Hodson P.I.
Investigative Solutions

TEXAS ASSOCIATION OF LICENSED INVESTIGATORS

Private Investigator Business & Marketing Masterclass

Building a Profitable, Ethical, and Scalable Investigations Firm

PARTICIPANT WORKBOOK

- Twenty-two worksheets, checklists and tools — one for every session
- Six hypothetical case studies — four worked in the room
- A 90-day plan you write before you leave

Justin D. Hodson, CPI
Hodson P.I. — Investigative Solutions

PRE-CONFERENCE SEMINAR
SEPTEMBER 24, 2026 · 9:00 – 5:00
THE MONARCH SAN ANTONIO
222 S ALAMO ST., SAN ANTONIO, TX 78205

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YOUR WORKBOOK · SECTION 1

Agenda for the Day

Being a great investigator does not automatically make someone a successful business owner. Today is about the second part. Each session has a matching worksheet, called out on the slides as we go.

9:00 – 9:20 20 MIN	■	**Welcome and Course Overview** Introductions, a quick read of who is in the room, and what you will walk out with at 5:00.
9:20 – 10:20 SESSION 1	■	**From Investigator to Business Owner** The shift from working cases to running a company. Choosing your business model on purpose — solo practice, boutique firm, or multi-investigator agency — and defining what the *right* firm looks like for you. PRINCIPLES 03 & 04 · FIRM-VISION EXERCISE, P. 4
10:20 – 10:35		**MORNING BREAK**
10:35 – 11:35 SESSION 2	■	**Branding, Marketing, Networking, and Business Development** Building a reputation that brings work to you. How attorneys and insurance professionals actually decide who to refer. Website, search presence, and social media — what is worth your time and what is not. PRINCIPLES 05 & 06 · WORKSHEETS PP. 6 – 8 · CASE STUDY P. 27
11:35 – 12:15 SESSION 3	■	**Pricing, Profitability, and Financial Discipline** What a billable investigative hour truly costs you. Setting rates, minimums, and retainers with confidence. Why not all revenue is good revenue. Method, never numbers — nobody in the room says what they charge. PRINCIPLES 07 & 04 · PRICING EXERCISE, PP. 9 – 11
12:15 – 1:45		**LUNCH**
1:45 – 2:35 SESSION 4	■	**Client Experience, Operational Systems, and Quality Control** Intake, expectations, and communication. Mapping your case life cycle from first call to closed file. Why clients forgive a disappointing result far more easily than silence or surprises. PRINCIPLES 05 & 03 · CASE LIFE CYCLE, PP. 12 – 16 · CASE STUDY P. 27
2:35 – 3:15 SESSION 5	■	**Hiring, Training, Leadership, and Company Culture** Employees, subcontractors, vendors — everyone who does the work in your name. When to hire, what a bad hire really costs, onboarding that sticks, and making sure your people know what good performance actually looks like. *No employees? Read every page here as your most-used subcontractor.* PRINCIPLES 08 & 07 · HIRING TOOLS, PP. 17 – 20 · CASE STUDY P. 28
3:15 – 3:30		**AFTERNOON BREAK**
3:30 – 4:05 SESSION 6	■	**Ethics, Risk Management, and Responsible Growth** Telling the difference between an ethical question, a business decision, and a legal requirement. Managing risk around licensing, contracts, subcontractors, and client data. PRINCIPLES 09 & 02 · ETHICAL FRAMEWORK, P. 21 · DILEMMA, P. 28
4:05 – 5:00 SESSION 7	■	**Scaling the Firm, Your 90-Day Action Plan, and Q&A** Why growth magnifies both strengths and problems. Delegating outcomes and authority — not just tasks. You finish by writing a 90-day plan and the first action you take within 72 hours. PRINCIPLES 08 & 09 · DELEGATION, P. 22 · 90-DAY PLAN, PP. 24 – 25

YOUR WORKBOOK · SECTION 1

Before We Begin

What to bring to each session

- [ ] Something to write with — this workbook is yours
- [ ] A rough sense of your own numbers, if you have them
- [ ] One problem you would like solved by 5:00

How the exercises work

Four are small-group discussions — the facts are printed on pages 27 – 28, so nobody works from the screen. Four you write on your own, in silence. All of them are built so you can take part fully without disclosing confidential client, employee, or financial information. Nothing you write here is collected; you decide what you say out loud.

The one thing I want solved today

Write it now, before the first session. Come back to it when you write your plan at about 4:27, and see whether the day answered it.

How to use this workbook after today

Roughly a third of these pages are worked in class. The rest are built for your desk in the weeks afterward — the checklists and scorecards are meant to be photocopied and reused.

- **Pages 3 – 25** follow the day, session by session
- **Pages 26 – 29** are the take-home decision tools and six case studies
- **Pages 30 – 31** are your notes, commitments, and where to go next

Notes

OPENING · 9:00 – 9:20

SESSION 7 · WRITTEN COMMITMENT

The first action I will take within 72 hours

You will complete this at the end of the day. One action, specific enough that someone else could tell whether you did it.

YOUR INSTRUCTOR

Justin D. Hodson, CPI

Founder of Hodson P.I. — Investigative Solutions, with more than two decades in the investigations profession. Today is drawn from the business side of that experience: what it actually takes to build a firm that is profitable, respected, and capable of running without you in the room.

This workbook covers business practices and professional judgment. It is not legal, tax, accounting, or employment advice. Questions specific to your firm — including licensing, contracts, employment classification, and tax treatment — should be reviewed with a qualified Texas professional. Case studies are hypothetical and describe no actual client, employee, or matter. Every exercise can be completed without disclosing confidential client, employee, or financial information.

From Investigator to Business Owner

Principle 03 — work ON the business. Principle 04 — act despite fear. This page is your starting position; you will come back to it when you write the plan at 4:27.

Two jobs, two skill sets

You were trained for the left column. You get paid for the right one. Mark where your last full week actually went — not where you meant it to go.

THE INVESTIGATOR'S WORK	HOURS LAST WEEK	THE OWNER'S WORK	HOURS LAST WEEK
Surveillance		Sales and quoting	
Statements and interviews		Marketing and referral relationships	
Research and records		Pricing and margin	
Case management		Hiring, training, supervision	
Report writing		Systems and documentation	
Evidence collection		Deciding what the firm becomes	
Total — working IN it		**Total — working ON it**	

What that ratio tells you

There is no correct answer on this page, and a busy field week is not a failure. The question is whether the right-hand column gets any protected time at all, or only the time left over — because the left-hand column will always expand to fill everything you give it. **Write the honest number:** hours per week I currently protect for working ON the business, and the number I intend to protect from Monday.

Where your firm is fragile today

Score each one honestly. Anything you score 1 or 2 is a candidate for your 90-day plan on page 24.

Work arrives without me chasing it	○ ○ ○ ○ ○
I could hand my pricing to a client without recalculating it	○ ○ ○ ○ ○
Someone other than me reads reports before they go out	○ ○ ○ ○ ○
The firm keeps running for two weeks if I am unreachable	○ ○ ○ ○ ○
I know which services actually make money	○ ○ ○ ○ ○
There is a written process for the work we do most often	○ ○ ○ ○ ○

1 = NOT TRUE 3 = PARTLY TRUE 5 = TRUE TODAY

Worksheet: Your Firm in Three Years

10 minutes — silent write, then pair. Nobody collects this, and you never have to say a number out loud.

One sentence: the firm I want in three years

Not a paragraph. One sentence, written as though it is already true. Hedged sentences are the ones that never happen.

The five questions behind that sentence

Which model?	Solo / lifestyle practice · Boutique firm · Multi-investigator agency — circle one, don't hedge
How many people, including me?	
What is the firm known for? Specific enough that it excludes something.	
What do I personally do all day?	
What has to be true about money? Revenue, margin, or what I take home — your choice which.	

What I am not building

Just as useful, and much less often written down. Name the version of this firm you have decided against, and why.

The gap

Between the firm you described above and the firm you have today, name the single biggest gap. Flag it now — it is almost certainly one of your three priorities at 4:27.

Pair up when the room does: read your sentence out loud once. If it is hard to say without qualifying it, it is not finished yet.

Worksheet: Business-Model Assessment

Where you actually are today

	A — SOLO / LIFESTYLE	B — BOUTIQUE FIRM	C — MULTI-INVESTIGATOR AGENCY
Who does the work	You	You plus a small team	Others; you lead
What it gives you	High rate, low overhead, total control	Some leverage, still hands-on	Scale, leverage, enterprise value
What it costs you	No leverage, no time off, little value without you	You manage people *and* carry a caseload	You stop being an investigator; payroll is fixed
Circle where you are			
Circle where you want to be			

If those two circles are in different columns

That gap is a plan, not a wish. Name the first structural change it requires — a hire, a written process, a price rise, a service you stop offering.

Pressure-test the model you picked

My model matches how I actually want to spend my days	○ ○ ○ ○ ○
My pricing supports that model — not the one I used to run	○ ○ ○ ○ ○
I can name what I would have to stop doing to get there	○ ○ ○ ○ ○
My family knows what this change asks of them	○ ○ ○ ○ ○
I am choosing this rather than drifting into it	○ ○ ○ ○ ○

1 = NO 3 = WORKING ON IT 5 = YES

A model is not a promotion ladder

C is not better than A. A firm of one that is priced properly, protected properly, and run deliberately beats a ten-person agency that cannot cover payroll in a slow quarter. The goal is not the biggest firm — it is the right firm, built on purpose.

Worksheet: Ideal-Client Profile

Principle 05 — be client-centric. You cannot market to everyone, and the firms that try are the ones whose phone rings constantly and whose bank account does not move.

Your best client, described precisely

Think of the engagement you would happily take ten more of. Describe the *type*, not the name — no client identifiers anywhere on this page.

Type of client	Insurance carrier / defense firm / plaintiff firm / corporate / family law / private individual / other
Who signs the engagement	
Typical case type	
Typical case value	
How they found you	
Why they came back	
What they need from you that is not the investigation	

The client you should stop taking

Same exercise, opposite direction. Not all revenue is good revenue — describe the type of work that pays and still costs you.

Type of work	
Why it looks attractive	
What it actually costs in time, margin, or morale	

Take this back to your intake checklist on page 12. An ideal-client profile that never reaches the person answering the phone is a diary entry, not a business decision.

Worksheet: Competitive Positioning

What somebody says about you when a colleague asks who they should use

That is your brand. Not your logo. Write the sentence you believe they currently use — then the sentence you want them to use.

Today:

In twelve months:

Positioning grid

Three firms your clients could call instead of you. No names needed — describe them.

	WHAT THEY ARE KNOWN FOR	WHERE YOU BEAT THEM
Competitor 1		
Competitor 2		
Competitor 3		
Your firm		

Deliberately no price column. What competitors charge is not something to collect, compare or discuss at an association event — and it is never the reason a good client chooses you.

The narrowing test

A position that excludes nothing positions you against nobody. Finish both sentences.

We are the firm you call when…

We are not the right firm when…

Reputation compounds slowly and breaks quickly

Reputation → expectation → delivery → referral. Referral is the output of the first three, not a channel you can buy more of — which is why marketing creates an expectation that operations has to fulfill.

Tools: Marketing Channels and Referral Sources

Marketing-channel evaluation

Score each channel you actually use. Cost can be dollars or hours — be consistent. Anything with a high cost and a low close rate is a candidate to stop, not to optimize.

CHANNEL	COST / MONTH	INQUIRIES	BECAME CLIENTS	WORTH CONTINUING?
Referrals from attorneys / adjusters				
Referrals from other investigators				
TALI and association involvement				
Client-side associations and conferences				
Website and search				
LinkedIn				
Other social media				
Paid ads / lead services				
Directory listings				

Referral-source tracker

Keep this running after today. The firms that know where work comes from stop guessing which marketing to cut in a slow quarter.

SOURCE	CASES THIS QUARTER	REVENUE	THANKED / FOLLOWED UP

Ask at intake, every time: “How did you hear about us?” — and record the answer where somebody other than you can see it.

Worksheet: What an Hour Actually Costs You

13 minutes. Use the hypothetical firm on page 11 or your own numbers — your choice, and nobody will ask which. No figures are said out loud.

Step 1 — your real annual cost of doing business

Everything the firm spends in a year, including a fair salary for the work you personally do. Not what you take home — what the role would cost you to replace.

COST CATEGORY	ANNUAL $
Your own compensation (the market rate for your role)	
Employee wages and payroll taxes	
Subcontractor costs	
Vehicles, fuel, maintenance, mileage	
Insurance — E&O, general liability, D&O, cyber, auto	
Licensing, bonding, continuing education, association dues	
Equipment, cameras, technology, software, databases	
Office, phone, internet, storage	
Marketing and business development	
Professional fees — attorney, CPA, bookkeeping	
Everything else	
Total annual cost — A	

Step 2 — your honest billable hours

Not 2,080. The hours a client actually pays for, after travel that you absorb, admin, marketing, quoting, training, vacation, and the days the phone does not ring.

Billable hours per week		**Weeks worked per year**	
Number of billing people (including you)		**Total billable hours — B**	

Step 3 — the floor

A ÷ B = the cost of producing one billable hour. This is not your price. It is the number below which every hour you sell loses money.

My true cost per billable hour	

This is a business-practice method, not accounting or tax advice. Take the finished number to your own CPA before you build a rate card on it.

Worksheet: Your Rate, Your Minimums, Your Floor

Step 4 — add the margin the firm needs

Margin is not greed. It is what funds training, equipment, insurance, the next hire, and a slow quarter. A firm with no margin cannot reinvest, and a firm that cannot reinvest cannot grow or even hold its position.

True cost per hour (from p. 9)		**Target margin %**	
Indicated hourly rate		**What you charge today**	

Step 5 — minimums and the policies that protect the rate

POLICY	YOURS TODAY	WHAT IT SHOULD BE
Minimum engagement (hours or dollars)		
Surveillance minimum per day		
Travel — billed, absorbed, or flat		
Mileage rate		
Cancellation window and fee		
Retainer required before work starts		
Rush / after-hours / weekend premium		
Report writing — billed or included		

Step 6 — practice it before a client hears it

Compare the indicated rate with what you charged on your last three engagements. Then rehearse saying the new number the way you would say it to a client — in the car, not in this room. A rate you cannot say without flinching is a rate you will discount.

Nothing on this page is said out loud today. Your numbers are yours, and what anyone else charges is none of this room's business.

LAST THREE ENGAGEMENTS	WHAT YOU CHARGED	WHAT THE WORKSHEET SAYS	DIFFERENCE
Engagement 1			
Engagement 2			
Engagement 3			

If the difference column is negative more than once, the problem is not that client — it is the price list. Raising a rate to an existing client is a conversation about scope, cost, and value, and it is easier to have than most people expect.

Tools: Profitability and Client Qualification

Is this service actually profitable?

Run one service line through this, then repeat it for the others at your desk. Most firms find at least one line that has been quietly subsidized.

	SERVICE LINE UNDER REVIEW
Revenue over the last 12 months	
Direct labor hours × true hourly cost	
Direct expenses — travel, equipment, databases	
Unbilled hours it consumes — quoting, callbacks, rework	
Contribution (revenue − everything above)	
Would you take ten more of these?	

Qualifying a prospective client — the five-minute filter

- ☐ **Fit:** is this the kind of work we do well and want more of?
- ☐ **Scope:** can I describe what done looks like, in writing, today?
- ☐ **Budget:** does what they need cost more than they expect to pay? Say so now, not later.
- ☐ **Expectation:** have they been told what a realistic outcome looks like — including no result?
- ☐ **Legality and ethics:** can I do this, should I do this, do I want to? (p. 21)
- ☐ **Payment:** retainer agreed, terms understood, and a written engagement before work begins.
- ☐ **Capacity:** can we staff it without damaging work we already promised?

Three or more unchecked boxes is a decline, or a different engagement than the one they asked for. Declining well earns more repeat work than taking the case badly.

Hypothetical firm — use these numbers if you'd rather not use your own

A three-investigator firm, owner included.

ANNUAL COST	$	BILLABLE HOURS	HOURS
Owner compensation (market rate for the role)	115,000	Billable hours per week, per person	22
Two investigators, wages + payroll taxes	148,000	Weeks worked per year	46
Vehicles, fuel, equipment, technology	44,000	Billing people (including owner)	3
Insurance, licensing, dues, training	31,000	**Total billable hours — B**	**3,036**
Office, phone, software, databases	27,000		
Marketing, professional fees, everything else	35,000		
Total annual cost — A	**400,000**	**A ÷ B — cost per billable hour**	**$131.75**

Margin here is a share of price, not a mark-up on cost: $131.75 ÷ 0.70 ≈ $188, where a 30% mark-up on cost would be $171. Decide which you mean before you quote. Every figure here is invented.

Work that does not cover its true cost is not a client relationship — it is a subsidy you pay for the privilege of being busy.

Checklist: Client Intake

Principle 05 — be client-centric. Principle 03 — work ON the business.

Client-intake checklist

Everything below happens before fieldwork starts. If your intake lives in your head, it is not an intake process — it is a habit, and habits do not survive delegation or a bad week.

- [ ] Caller, matter type, and who is actually the client recorded
- [ ] Conflict check run against existing and former clients
- [ ] What they want to *achieve* — not just the task they asked for
- [ ] Realistic outcome discussed, including what a negative result looks like
- [ ] Scope written down: what is included, what is not
- [ ] Cost estimate given, with the basis for it explained
- [ ] Minimums, travel, cancellation and rush policies stated up front
- [ ] Written engagement agreement signed
- [ ] Retainer received and recorded
- [ ] Deadlines and any court or claim dates captured
- [ ] Communication standard set — who they hear from, and how often
- [ ] Referral source recorded
- [ ] File opened, assigned, and the investigator briefed on all of the above

What intake is really for

Every complaint that arrives later was available to you here. Intake is where price, scope, expectation, and communication get set — and where the client learns whether being surprised by you is a possibility.

Fix your own intake

Which two items above do you not currently do, or do inconsistently? Write them, and who will own them from Monday.

Tools: Communication Standard and Case Budgets

Your communication standard

These are the five moments from the slide, in the same order. Write who makes the contact, how, and how fast — then hold everyone to it, including yourself.

THE MOMENT	WHO CONTACTS THE CLIENT	HOW	WITHIN
1 Case opened and assigned			
2 Day two, then on a rhythm — *whether or not there is news*			
3 The moment anything moves — scope, budget, timeline			
4 Before the report, not with it — especially a negative result			
5 With the invoice — one sentence on what they are paying for			

Three more worth a written rule once the five above are working: something significant observed · budget reaches 75% of estimate · file closed and the referral source recorded.

The no-news update — steal it, change the nouns

“Nothing observed today. The vehicle stayed at the residence from 7 to 3, I’m back on it Thursday, and I’ll call you Friday either way.”

Suggested language. Ninety seconds to send, and it is the single cheapest thing in this book. People skip it because they do not know what to write when nothing happened — that sentence is what to write.

Case-budget monitor

Run this on any engagement with an estimate. The 75% line is the one that saves relationships — it is the last moment a conversation is still a choice rather than an apology.

CASE REF (NO CLIENT NAME)	ESTIMATE	SPENT TO DATE	% USED	CLIENT TOLD?

Silence costs nothing to fix in advance and a great deal to fix afterward.

Worksheet: The Case Life Cycle

Map your own case life cycle

Six stages. Every one is a place a client can be surprised — which means every one needs a rule and an owner. Write yours, then mark the stages where nothing is written down.

STAGE	WHAT HAPPENS IN YOUR FIRM	WHO OWNS IT	WRITTEN?
1 — Intake			
2 — Assignment			
3 — Fieldwork			
4 — Review			
5 — Report			
6 — Close			

What each stage has to answer

01 **Intake**
Who they are, what they need, whether you should take it, and what it will cost.

02 **Assignment**
Who is doing it, what they have been told, and what they are authorized to decide without calling you.

03 **Fieldwork**
The work — plus the standing rule for when the client hears from you during it.

04 **Review**
Nobody's first draft reaches a client. Another reader, or a cold read the next morning against a written checklist. Solo changes the method, not the rule.

05 **Report**
Delivered when promised, in the format promised, with the invoice explained.

06 **Close**
Confirm satisfaction, capture the referral source, and file what you learned.

The rule that makes this real

If a process exists only in the owner's head, the company does not have a process. Pick the one stage above with the biggest gap and write the first version of it this week — one page is enough to start.

Checklist: Quality-Control Audit

Quality-control audit checklist

Run this on a sample of closed files, on a schedule — not when you feel uneasy. Three files a month beats thirty files after a complaint.

- [ ] Report reviewed by someone other than its author before delivery
- [ ] Facts in the report supported by the evidence in the file
- [ ] Opinion and observation clearly distinguished
- [ ] Dates, times, locations and identifiers internally consistent
- [ ] Video / photo logs complete and matched to the narrative
- [ ] Chain of custody documented where it matters
- [ ] Scope delivered matches scope sold
- [ ] Hours billed reconcile to the activity log
- [ ] Client communication happened at the points your standard requires
- [ ] Licensing current for every person who touched the file
- [ ] Subcontractor work met the same standard as in-house work
- [ ] Client data stored — and scheduled for destruction — per your policy
- [ ] Anything that went wrong resulted in a process change, not just a corrected file

Audit log

DATE	FILE REF (NO CLIENT NAME)	REVIEWER	FINDINGS	ACTION TAKEN

Training and audit are two halves of one thing

Training tells your people what good looks like. The audit tells you whether it is actually happening. Do both, or the second one becomes a disciplinary meeting instead of a system.

Tools: Case Audit and Client Satisfaction

Single-case audit form

Photocopy this one. It is the form a team lead uses on a file they did not work.

File reference		**Reviewed by**	
Service type		**Date of review**	
Scope sold vs. scope delivered			
Report quality — evidence, clarity, tone			
Communication against the standard			
Budget against estimate			
Process change required			

Measuring client satisfaction without a survey nobody answers

Three questions, asked at close by someone who is not the investigator on the file. Short beats thorough — a question they answer is worth ten they ignore.

01 Did we do what we said we would do?
Scope and expectation. A no here is an intake failure, not a fieldwork failure.

02 Were you ever surprised?
Cost, timing, or silence. This is the question that predicts complaints better than any other.

03 Would you use us again for this type of work — and if not, what would have to change?
The only satisfaction number that matters is whether they call back.

QUARTER	FILES CLOSED	ASKED	WOULD USE AGAIN	THEMES IN WHAT THEY SAID

A complaint that arrives at your desk has usually been available to you for two weeks. The point of asking is to find it while it is still a phone call.

Tool: When to Hire

Principle 08 — delegate to replace yourself. Principle 07 — reinvest profits.

Should you hire? — the honest test

Score each statement. A hire made from exhaustion rather than evidence is the most expensive mistake in this business.

I have turned away work I wanted in each of the last three months	○ ○ ○ ○ ○
The work exists at this volume in a normal quarter, not just a good one	○ ○ ○ ○ ○
I could cover this person's full cost for six months if revenue dipped	○ ○ ○ ○ ○
There is a written description of what this person would do	○ ○ ○ ○ ○
There is a written standard for what good performance looks like in that role	○ ○ ○ ○ ○
Someone other than me can train and supervise them	○ ○ ○ ○ ○
I am hiring to build capacity — not to escape a task I dislike	○ ○ ○ ○ ○

1 = NO 3 = PARTLY 5 = YES

What a hire actually costs before it earns

COST	$ / HOURS
Recruiting, screening, background and licensing	
Wages and payroll taxes during unproductive weeks	
Equipment, vehicle, technology, software seats	
Insurance and bonding impact	
Senior investigator's unbilled supervision and shadowing hours	
Your own time — interviewing, onboarding, reviewing early work	
Total before this person earns	

Employment classification, wage and hour rules, and background-check requirements are legal questions with Texas-specific answers. Confirm them with a qualified Texas professional before you post the role.

The alternative you did not consider

Before you hire: could this be a subcontractor, a service, software, a price rise that reduces volume, or a service line you stop offering? Write the alternative you rejected and why.

Tool: Hiring Scorecard

Before you interview anyone

Role		**Reports to**	
The three outcomes this role owns			
What good looks like at 90 days			
Non-negotiable requirements			
Nice to have			

Candidate scorecard

Same questions, same criteria, every candidate. Unstructured interviews are how firms end up hiring the person they liked most rather than the person who could do the work.

CRITERION	WHAT YOU ARE LISTENING FOR	1 – 5
Relevant capability	Has done the actual work, not adjacent work	
Judgment under pressure	A real example where they chose badly and what changed after	
Written communication	A writing sample or report you have actually read	
Reliability	Attendance, deadlines, follow-through — verified, not asserted	
Ethics	How they handled a request they should not have honored	
Coachability	Response to a correction. Ask for a specific instance	
Fit with how you work	Solo autonomy, or a team that reviews each other's files	
References verified	Two, both spoken to, both asked the same questions	
Total		

The red flag you already saw

Almost no hire goes wrong because the résumé was bad. It goes wrong because a screening step was skipped under time pressure, or because somebody ignored the thing they noticed in week one. Write the concern down at the time — and decide it deliberately.

Checklist: Employee Onboarding

First week

- [ ] Licensing, registration, and any state requirements completed and verified
- [ ] Employment paperwork, policies, and handbook acknowledged
- [ ] Equipment, vehicle, systems access, and phone issued
- [ ] Introduced to every person they will work with, and told who to ask what
- [ ] Walked through the case life cycle — all six stages, on real closed files
- [ ] Given the written standard for what good performance looks like in this role
- [ ] Ethics, confidentiality, and client-data rules covered explicitly, not assumed
- [ ] Told what they are authorized to decide without calling anyone

First 30 / 60 / 90 days

BY DAY	WHAT THEY SHOULD BE ABLE TO DO	WHO CONFIRMS IT	DONE
30	Shadowed and assisted; first solo assignments under review		
60	Carrying a partial caseload; reports reviewed every time		
90	Meeting the written standard for the role; review held and documented		

The 90-day rule

Without onboarding, a good hire and a bad hire look identical for ninety days — and by the time you can tell them apart, you have paid for both. Onboarding is not paperwork; it is the fastest way to find out which one you hired.

What you will actually change

Which of the items above does your firm not do today? Pick one and name the person who will own it for the next hire.

Tools: Performance Review and Leadership Check

Employee performance review

Against the written standard, not against your mood that week. Accountability and appreciation are not opposites — most firms manage one or the other.

AREA	STANDARD	EVIDENCE	1 – 5
Quality of investigative work			
Report writing and accuracy			
Client communication			
Deadlines and reliability			
Ethics, licensing, and compliance			
Team contribution			
Development since last review			

What they did well — specifically	
What changes before the next review	
What I owe them — training, tools, clarity	

Leadership self-assessment

My people know exactly what good performance looks like in their role	○ ○ ○ ○ ○
I give specific praise, not just 'good job'	○ ○ ○ ○ ○
I name problems early and directly instead of hoping they resolve	○ ○ ○ ○ ○
The standard applies to me as visibly as it applies to them	○ ○ ○ ○ ○
I delegate outcomes and authority, not just tasks	○ ○ ○ ○ ○
I ask my team how the work could be done better — and then change it	○ ○ ○ ○ ○
People bring me bad news early	○ ○ ○ ○ ○

1 = RARELY 3 = SOMETIMES 5 = CONSISTENTLY

Framework: Ethical Decisions and Risk

Reputation takes years to build and one decision to damage.

Three different questions — and people collapse them into one

01 **Can I?**
The legal question. Statute, licensing rules, and the contract. Not a matter of opinion and not one to guess at — this is where counsel earns the fee.

02 **Should I?**
The ethical question. Legal and wrong is a real category. Ethical conduct protects the client, the investigator, the license, the firm, and the profession.

03 **Do I want to?**
The business question. Some work clears both tests above and is still bad for your firm — wrong client, wrong margin, wrong exposure.

Work the dilemma

The request (no identifiers)	
Can I? — what rule governs it, and who confirms that	
Should I? — who is harmed, and what does it risk	
Do I want to? — what it earns, what it costs	
Decision, and the version that keeps the client if there is one	

Layers of protection — review annually

- [ ] Errors & omissions coverage current, and the limit still matches the work you take
- [ ] General liability, and auto for every vehicle used in the field
- [ ] Directors & officers, and cyber coverage
- [ ] Bonding current where required
- [ ] Written engagement terms on every matter — no handshake engagements
- [ ] A change process for when scope moves mid-case
- [ ] Subcontractor agreements: their conduct is your exposure
- [ ] Licensing current for every person in the field, checked on a date, not on memory
- [ ] Client-data storage, access, and destruction policy — written and followed
- [ ] An attorney you already have a relationship with, before you need one

Coverage types, licensing rules and contract terms vary. Review the specifics with a qualified Texas professional — this list is a prompt, not advice.

Worksheet: What Are You Still Approving?

What still requires you personally

Write five. Then be honest about which ones need *you* and which ones only need *a decision*.

WHAT ONLY I CAN DO	TASK OR DECISION?	HOURS / MONTH	WHO COULD OWN THE OUTCOME

Circle the one that costs the most time for the least value

What would have to be true for you to hand it over — a written process, a trained person, a tool, a tolerance for it being done differently than you would do it? That answer is your real constraint.

Delegate outcomes, not tasks

01 **Identify the task**
Repetitive, time-consuming, or lower priority — but still essential. Start where the volume is, not where the drama is.

02 **Choose the person**
Match to skill and current workload, or to the potential to develop it. The wrong person makes delegation itself look like the problem.

03 **Define it clearly**
The outcome, the deadline, the standard, and the decisions they can make without you. Especially that last one.

04 **Evaluate and adjust**
Review the process, not just the output. Ask how it could work better — then actually change it.

Handing over a task and keeping the decision is not delegation

It is just more email. If every outcome still routes through you for approval, you have not delegated — you have added a step, and you are still the bottleneck.

Tool: Key-Performance-Indicator Scorecard

Know your numbers — monthly

You do not need all of these. Pick the six that would have told you something you did not know last quarter, and track only those.

MEASURE	HOW YOU CALCULATE IT	TARGET	ACTUAL
Revenue	Invoiced this month		
Gross margin %	Revenue minus direct case cost		
Utilization	Billable hours ÷ available hours		
Realization	Hours billed ÷ hours worked		
Average case value	Revenue ÷ cases closed		
New inquiries	Count, by source		
Conversion rate	Engagements ÷ inquiries		
Repeat / referral share	Revenue from returning or referred clients		
Days to invoice	Report delivered to invoice sent		
Days to collect	Invoice sent to payment received		
Report rework rate	Reports returned at review ÷ reports written		
Client complaints	Count, and cause: work or communication?		

The two most people never track

Realization tells you how much of the work you actually do gets paid for. **Report rework rate** tells you whether your training is working before a client does. Neither requires new software — both require somebody writing a number down each month.

Who sees these, and when

A number nobody reviews on a date is a number nobody acts on. Name the day of the month and the person who reports it.

Your 90-Day Action Plan

Three priorities for the next 90 days — three, not seven. Before you start, turn back to page 2 and read the one thing you wrote at nine o'clock this morning — then pick your three from what you wrote on pages 4, 5, 10, 14 and 22. Nobody collects this; it is yours to keep, and its only value is whether you look at it again in ninety days.

Priority 1

The priority			
Specific actions			
Who is responsible (by name)			
What it needs — money, time, a person, a tool, advice			
Completion date		**How I'll know it worked**	

Priority 2

The priority			
Specific actions			
Who is responsible (by name)			
What it needs — money, time, a person, a tool, advice			
Completion date		**How I'll know it worked**	

Priority 3

The priority			
Specific actions			
Who is responsible (by name)			
What it needs — money, time, a person, a tool, advice			
Completion date		**How I'll know it worked**	

Obstacles, Accountability, and the First 72 Hours

The obstacle most likely to stop me — named honestly

Time, money, a person, a habit, or the fear of the conversation. Naming it now is what makes it survivable in week six.

PRIORITY	THE OBSTACLE	WHAT I'LL DO WHEN IT SHOWS UP
1		
2		
3		

Who I am telling

A plan nobody else knows about is a private wish. Name one person — a partner, a peer, someone in this room — who will ask you about this in 30 days, and the date you will hear from them.

Accountability partner		**Date they check in**	

Review dates

CHECKPOINT	DATE	WHAT MUST BE TRUE BY THEN
30 days		
60 days		
90 days		

THE 72-HOUR COMMITMENT

The first action I will take within 72 hours

One action. Specific enough that someone else could tell whether you did it. Not “work on pricing” — “recalculate my true hourly cost and email my new rate sheet to myself by Friday.”

The plan in your hands is worth exactly what you do with it in the next three days.

Tools: New Services and Owner Delegation

Should you add a new service line?

- [ ] Existing clients are already asking for it — repeatedly, not once
- [ ] It fits the reputation you are building, and does not confuse what you are known for
- [ ] You can price it against a true cost you have actually calculated
- [ ] Someone in the firm can already do it well, or can be trained inside 90 days
- [ ] Licensing, insurance and compliance implications are confirmed, in writing
- [ ] It does not quietly subsidize itself from your profitable work
- [ ] You can stop offering it without damaging a client relationship if it fails

Two or more unchecked: run it as a limited trial with a stop date, not as a permanent line on the website.

Should the owner still be doing this?

01 **Only I can do it — legally or by license**
Keep it. Then ask what would have to change for that to stop being true in two years.

02 **Only I can do it — because only I know how**
That is a documentation problem, not a talent problem. Write it down; that is the delegation.

03 **I do it because I enjoy it**
Legitimate — as long as you have priced the hour it costs the firm.

04 **I do it because nobody else has been trained**
That is a training decision you have been deferring, and it compounds every month.

05 **I do it because I do not trust the outcome**
Define the standard and the review. Trust is a system, not a personality trait.

Growth magnifies what is already there

It does not fix anything. A strong training system becomes consistent quality at scale; a weak one becomes the same error repeated everywhere. Clear pricing compounds into margin; unclear pricing compounds into losses. Build the system before the volume arrives — afterward, you are building it while running.

Case Studies 1 and 2

All case studies in this workbook are hypothetical. They describe no actual client, employee, or matter. Cases 1 – 4 are the ones worked in groups during the day; cases 5 and 6 on page 29 are yours to take home. They make better team meetings than they do exam questions.

HYPOTHETICAL CASE STUDY

The phone rings, the bank account doesn't

A four-investigator firm spends heavily on search ads and a lead service. Inquiries go from eight a month to twenty-five.

Most callers are individuals with domestic matters and small budgets. The owner personally fields every call. Two attorney clients who used to call him directly now go through the same intake queue and wait.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is actually broken here — the campaign, the intake, or the pricing?
- What would you measure to know which one it is?
- What would you stop doing on Monday, and what would that cost you in the first month?

COMPETING CONSIDERATIONS

- The campaign is working by its own measure: inquiries tripled.
- Turning off spend feels like turning off growth, especially after paying for it.
- The owner answering every call was a strength at eight inquiries a month.

THE LESSON

Marketing creates an expectation that operations has to fulfill. More inquiries is not more business — it is more work, and only qualification and pricing decide which kind.

HYPOTHETICAL CASE STUDY

The complaint that was not about the work

A firm works a nine-day assignment for a repeat client. The work is competent and the report is thorough. Nothing was found that supported the client's theory — a legitimate negative result, honestly reached.

At intake, the client asked not to be contacted unless there was something to report.

The client hears nothing for nine days, then receives a full report and an invoice on the same day, and tells a colleague the firm 'ran up the bill and found nothing.'

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- At which point in the nine days would a single phone call have changed the outcome?
- What would that call have cost the firm, in money and in time?
- Whose job was it to make it, and where in your own process does that rule live?

COMPETING CONSIDERATIONS

- Interim updates on a negative result can feel like reporting failure.
- Field time spent communicating is time not spent observing.
- The client's instruction was explicit, and overriding a client's stated preference has its own cost.

THE LESSON

A client forgives a disappointing result far more easily than silence, surprises, or an invoice they did not see coming. Communication is not the soft part of this business.

Case Studies 3 and 4

HYPOTHETICAL CASE STUDY

The productive problem

An investigator bills more hours than anyone else in the firm and has done for two years running.

His reports come back from review with errors. He resents the review and says so, loudly. Two clients have called about his tone, and one junior investigator has quietly asked not to be scheduled with him.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is he actually costing the firm, in numbers you could estimate?
- What did the firm fail to do that allowed this to run for two years?
- What does the rest of the team learn about the standard while this continues?
- No employees? Read him as the subcontractor you use most — nothing about the answer changes.

COMPETING CONSIDERATIONS

- He is the highest biller, and revenue is real.
- Replacing an experienced investigator is expensive and slow.
- The behavior may be partly the product of never having been told, clearly, in writing.

THE LESSON

Accountability and appreciation are not opposites. A standard nobody wrote down was never a standard — and the cost of avoiding one conversation compounds every quarter it is avoided.

HYPOTHETICAL CASE STUDY

The client who asks for something you should not do

One of a firm's three largest clients sends an assignment with an unusual instruction attached. The instruction would get the result faster and cheaper.

The investigator is confident it crosses a line. The requester is not a lawyer and does not appear to realize what they are asking for.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Vote in the box at the foot of this page before you discuss it — take it, decline it, or counter-offer.
- Which of the three questions — can I, should I, do I want to — does this actually turn on?
- Who do you call before you answer, and what do you put in writing?
- Is there a version of this engagement that gets the client what they need, legitimately?

COMPETING CONSIDERATIONS

- The account is worth real money and the relationship is years old.
- A blunt refusal may cost the relationship; a soft one may read as agreement.
- The requester may be repeating an instruction handed to them by someone else.

THE LESSON

The answer that protects the license usually also protects the client — including from themselves. Decline the method, not the client, and offer the version you can defend.

Case 4 — your vote, before you discuss it

TAKE IT · DECLINE IT · COUNTER-OFFER — circle one, then write why. Nobody's hand goes up in the room.

Case Studies 5 and 6

These two are not worked in class. Run them at your next team meeting, or against your own firm on a quiet afternoon — both describe patterns that are far easier to see in someone else's business than in your own.

HYPOTHETICAL CASE STUDY

The investigator who cannot say the number

A capable investigator with eleven years' experience runs a solo practice. Work is steady and clients like her. She has raised her rate once in six years, and discounts roughly a third of engagements without being asked.

She has never calculated what an hour costs her to produce. When a prospect hesitates at a quote, she reduces it before they say anything.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is the difference between a discount, a concession, and a subsidy?
- What would she need to know before her next quote to hold the number?
- What does six years of unexamined pricing cost — in reinvestment, not just revenue?

COMPETING CONSIDERATIONS

- Raising rates risks clients who chose her partly on price.
- Her capacity is finite; every discounted hour is an hour unavailable at full rate.
- Some long-standing clients have real budget limits that are not negotiating tactics.

THE LESSON

You cannot hold a price you have not justified to yourself. The rate conversation is a cost conversation first — and it happens on page 9, not in front of the client.

HYPOTHETICAL CASE STUDY

The agency that says yes to everything

A four-investigator agency takes every case that calls. Domestic, insurance defense, corporate, process serving, background work — all of it, at whatever the client will pay.

Revenue is up 20% year over year. Margin has fallen for three consecutive quarters, two investigators have resigned, and the owner is personally reviewing every file.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Which of these signals would you have noticed first, and when?
- How would you decide what work to stop taking — and how do you tell an existing client?
- What does 'not all revenue is good revenue' cost to apply in a quarter where you need the cash?

COMPETING CONSIDERATIONS

- Turning work away feels like turning away growth, especially in a slow month.
- Some low-margin work exists to keep a valuable relationship warm.
- Narrowing means telling people what you no longer do — and being told no in return.

THE LESSON

Growth magnifies existing strengths and existing problems at the same rate. Volume was never the problem here; the absence of a rule for what they take was.

Notes and Personal Commitments

Notes

ANYTHING YOU WANT TO KEEP

Three people I will contact this month

From this room or from the profession. Principle 06 — ask for help. If you see somebody successful, embrace them; the profession moves forward when people help each other.

NAME	WHY	BY WHEN

What I said I would stop doing

Every plan on page 24 requires time that is currently occupied. Name what makes room.

Build the Right Firm, On Purpose

The closing challenge

Build a firm that is profitable, respected, ethical, and built the way you actually chose. Not the biggest firm, and not the one you drifted into — the right one: priced honestly, run on systems, staffed by people who know what good looks like, and protected by the line you will not cross.

Where this workbook goes next

- Pages 9 – 11 get rerun every year, and any time your costs move
- Pages 12, 15, 19 and 21 are checklists — photocopy them
- Page 23 is monthly; page 24 is quarterly
- Page 4 gets rewritten once a year. It should change.

If you get stuck

- TALI — the room you are sitting in is the resource
- Your CPA and your attorney, before you need them, not after
- A peer outside your market who will tell you the truth
- One written process is worth more than three good intentions

Nine principles, one next step each

01 Learn from mistakes	02 Learn from criticism	03 Work ON the business
04 Act despite fear	05 Be client-centric	06 Ask for help
07 Reinvest profits	08 Delegate to replace yourself	09 Control your growth

Circle the two that matter most for the next 90 days. Two is enough.

THANK YOU FOR SPENDING THE DAY

Justin D. Hodson, CPI

Hodson P.I. — Investigative Solutions · hodsonpi.com

Slides from today are available to every attendee. If something in here would work better for your firm with a small change, make the change — this workbook is yours.

This workbook covers business practices and professional judgment. It is not legal, tax, accounting, or employment advice. Questions specific to your firm — including licensing, contracts, employment classification, and tax treatment — should be reviewed with a qualified Texas professional. Case studies are hypothetical and describe no actual client, employee, or matter. Every exercise can be completed without disclosing confidential client, employee, or financial information.