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When **Saul Ewing LLP's** downtown Pittsburgh office co-managing partners [Charlie Kelly](#) and [David Berk](#) held a mini-retreat in March, instead of immediately getting down to business, staring at numbers and metrics, the session opened with an ice breaker.

"We spent the first 90 minutes with question after question about what people like by way of movies, or if you could speak to anyone living or dead, who would it be?" Kelly said. "Then we had to match the response with the person who gave it. People said [John F. Kennedy](#) and Saint Paul. But this effort to get to know one another at that level just makes Saul Ewing a pleasant place. You feel you have a bigger, broader picture of who your peers are than, 'here's my practice.'"

It's a strategy Berk and Kelly have used since Saul Ewing first entered Pittsburgh in 2012. Veteran lawyers make it possible for large, full-service firms to enter the region. Their connections pave the way to building business, and their knowledge of the local legal community helps them bring other lawyers on board and reinforce a sense of culture in relatively short order among those who hail from different firms. In turn, lawyers who might not have stood much of a chance of leading their prior firm get a turn at the top.

In Pittsburgh, the trend of national full-service firms opening their own offices rather than acquiring already established firms began in 1989 when then-Cleveland-based Jones Day opened its office downtown. Several more firms came from Philadelphia in the mid-1990s and another burst around 2000.

More recently, Philadelphia-based Saul Ewing and San Francisco-based Gordon & Rees LLP set up shop downtown in 2012, and Philadelphia-based Blank Rome LLP arrived in early 2015.

Each said the move was client-driven and that finding the right leadership was critical.

“Without question, the relative success of our national offices is largely a function of the quality of their leadership,” said Dion Cominos, firmwide managing partner at Gordon & Rees. “When selecting an office managing partner, the qualities we look for include a highly entrepreneurial spirit, a tremendously positive and collegial attitude, great lawyering skills, strong local connections and a strong sense of how what gets done on the practice side translates to the bottom line.”

Lori Carpenter, president of downtown-based recruitment firm **Carpenter Legal Search Inc.**, said she knows of some firms — though she wouldn’t identify them — that have eyed the Pittsburgh market for several years but haven’t established an office because they haven’t found a practice group that works well with them or is the right cultural fit.

“The difficulty has become the profitability of a new office,” Carpenter said. “It’s a huge time and revenue commitment, and while I think it would be in a firm’s best interest to focus on the leadership skills of someone they’re looking to run the office, some have the expectation that a great rainmaker has great leadership and interpersonal skills and those will translate into management of an office. That isn’t always the case.”

In order to open a new office here, firms need to hire lawyers who’ll generate between \$3 million and \$10 million in revenue annually. So even if they already have clients here, that means hiring strong producers to bring in additional business. It’s not easy.

“The Pittsburgh market is very different,” Carpenter said. “It’s not Philly, New York or D.C. It’s close-knit, and there are only so many high-producing partners looking to make a move at any given time.”

And putting a lawyer with a big book of business in a leadership role that includes administrative duties makes a short list even smaller.

“It is very difficult to manage full-time and have a practice,” Carpenter said.

Yet, **Saul Ewing, Gordon & Rees** and Blank Rome all have taken on the challenge of building a Pittsburgh practice from scratch. Here’s a look at their strategies for doing so:

Saul Ewing

When the Saul Ewing office was formed three years ago, Berk brought over a group from Schnader Harrison Segal & Lewis LLP. Kelly, a veteran of Leech Tishman and K&L Gates, came a year later.

Berk recalled that Saul Ewing’s downtown office started out with 10,000 square feet, four lawyers, and a plan to fill it in five years.

“We did better than that,” he said. “We filled it in three.”

Today, the office has 17 lawyers.

A combination of the firm's reputation and that of the lawyers it added here has helped Saul Ewing's expansion downtown, said Barry Levin, firmwide managing partner who is based in Baltimore.

It's not unusual for Saul Ewing to have co-leaders for a newer office, Levin added.

"When you're bringing in people from different backgrounds, you want to create a dynamic for collaboration and cohesiveness," he said. "Both Charlie and David are very busy practicing lawyers, and they do cover for each other. It proves an easier access capability for folks in the office and our other offices to be able to reach one of them on short notice if need be."

Kelly and Berk divvy administrative duties as needed, and both help with recruiting.

"If there's a transaction-oriented recruit, I'm more likely to take the lead," Berk said. "If it's a litigation-oriented recruit, Charlie will likely take the lead."

This spring, Berk recruited his own brother-in-law, veteran lawyer Jeff Letwin, from Schnader.

"Generally, we're both charged with doing the same types of things when trying to promote the firm, and I mean that in the best sense of the word — capitalizing on opportunities," Kelly said. "Since I'm a litigator and David's a financial and corporate lawyer, when it comes to things like budgets and properly taking care of our reserve of cash, he's probably a lot better than I am. It comes naturally to me to be scouting around the office to make sure people feel at home and are getting the opportunities they want."

They reach out to other Saul Ewing offices "to make sure the services we can provide in Pittsburgh are known, and we want to know about pockets of talent or areas of expertise in the other offices so we can provide the best services to our clients, and Saul Ewing can have as broad a reach as possible," Kelly said.

And both work with younger lawyers to help with their development.

Blank Rome

The latest large full-service law firm to enter Pittsburgh might not have made the move had it not been for a key return to the fold.

When Michael Krancer came back to Blank Rome after serving as Pennsylvania's secretary of the Department of Environmental Protection, he drove home to Chairman and Managing Partner Alan Hoffman the need to have a Pittsburgh office.

"He was going to Pittsburgh once a week, and we had a number of clients there — PNC, Shell, Chevron," Hoffman said.

Being hands-on with energy clients was part of the motivation to set up shop, but there was more.

"As a Pennsylvania law firm, we needed to expand our presence in our home state," Hoffman said. The firm has 15 offices.

Philadelphia's eighth-largest law firm, Blank Rome started its downtown Pittsburgh office with five lawyers, all partners in its litigation department, in January 2015. Four came from the downtown office of Duane Morris, also based in Philadelphia, including George Medved, whom Hoffman tapped as administrative partner. Medved has opened more offices — three — for out-of-town law firms than anyone else in the market.

"People may not know Blank Rome, but they know George Medved, so their impression is going to be through the person we selected to be in charge of the office," Hoffman said. "Had we not met someone with the experience, talent and personality of George, the business case could be great, but the likelihood we'd open an office would be slim."

Medved's strategy from the start was to hire lawyers that come with strong recommendations: Along with the four who came from Duane Morris, Blank Rome's fifth hire, Jayme Butcher, had worked at Reed Smith LLP.

"In Pittsburgh, even if they come from someplace else, the probability of us knowing them is high," Medved said. "I had never worked with Jayme previously, but Joe Moran and Amy Coles had. So before they come in the door, we're all integrated to some extent. You either know them or you know people who know them, and it's those people we're most likely to hire. So I think integration is easier in this city. We have clients suggesting people we should talk to, and when clients vouch for a lawyer, that's a pretty good sign it's someone you can easily integrate."

Hoffman wants the office to be full-service with corporate, litigation and intellectual property, but which areas of specialization are added will depend on the available talent.

"When we opened in Houston four years ago, we started with litigation, then we added M&A, bankruptcy, financial, and we're continuing to grow," Hoffman said. "We started with 10 lawyers, and now we're around 42. Los Angeles we opened in spring 2009 the same way we've opened Pittsburgh, with just five. Now we're upwards of 50. We're here to stay, but this is a marathon, not a sprint, and we're pleased (with growth), but I think the time to judge the success is three to five years from now, not after seven months."

Gordon & Rees

Gordon & Rees has built its path from west to east by starting offices with groups of lawyers from high-powered firms. In Pittsburgh, it hired seven litigators from Buchanan Ingersoll & Rooney PC, the city's third-largest firm, including shareholder Manoj Jegasothy, who was tapped as managing partner.

Today, Cominos, the firm's firmwide managing partner, calls the Pittsburgh office its "poster child."

It has grown to 35, about doubling in size this past February by adding 17 lawyers from Dickie, McCamey & Chilcote PC, building expertise in energy, real estate and health care. In addition, two new law school graduates will join next month.

Integration of the newcomers was "almost seamless," Jegasothy said, and the firm is in talks to take on more space in the Gulf Tower.

"Fortunately, the growth in Pittsburgh has been accomplished with surprisingly little difficulty and much more quickly than we ever imagined," Cominos said. "Although there was the obvious capital investment at the front end, we enjoyed positive cash flow earlier than we had pro formaed. The easiest part has been for management to sit back and watch Manoj and his team of highly motivated self-starters achieve great success with only limited involvement from the mother ship. It's been a virtual plug-and-play operation."

While Cominos believes the Pittsburgh office can be very successful at its current size, it "certainly has the ability to take on additional capacity," he said. Gordon & Rees is open to acquisitions of smaller or boutique offices to add capabilities here, as long as the lawyers fit in well with the firm's culture.

"We see great potential in the energy and real estate spaces, as well as maintaining our core practices such as employment, construction, intellectual property," Cominos said.

Jegasothy said growth is based on being opportunistic, and there's no size goal.

"We don't hem ourselves in with a narrow plan," he added. "That said, with the energy we have in our office, more growth would certainly not surprise us."

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