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Veteran attorneys increasingly switching firms

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In his 19 years at Cohen & Grigsby PC, Michael Syme grew the law firm's affordable housing group from a "couple of housing authorities, pretty much local," to more than 60 in 23 states. He chaired the practice and held other high-level posts within the firm. He liked the culture and his fellow lawyers.

But Syme had to face facts. To grow, he had to go.

"What we needed was a national platform with more lawyers practicing the same area of affordable housing," he said.

So in June, Syme and two attorneys from the group, Marc Rosenthal and Alec Stone, moved to Fox Rothschild LLP.

With 123 lawyers at its downtown headquarters and two other offices, Cohen & Grigsby is four times Fox Rothschild's size in Pittsburgh, but Philadelphia-based Fox Rothschild is one of the largest law firms in the country with more than 800 lawyers in 22 offices.

The move is working out — being at a larger firm is paying off for Syme.

"We've had a number of new clients join us, and I can't pin that on being at a firm with a national footprint, but we have seen a better ability to deliver goods and services," he said.

"We're doing work on the Southeast Coast of Florida and using the West Palm Beach office to handle a lot of things on the ground," he continued. "We're doing transactions in Texas and can use offices there to handle real estate and tax work, and we've been able to utilize a group of tax lawyers in the Denver office who have experience with low-income housing."

On the other hand, Roberta Anderson found she didn't need international — let alone national — reach.

A partner who worked at K&L Gates LLP for 20 years and helped to launch its cyber law and cybersecurity practice, Anderson left for Cohen & Grigsby earlier this year as a member of the litigation practice, focused on data security and insurance recovery.

While K&L Gates employs more than 2,000 lawyers in 45 offices around the world, Cohen & Grigsby is much smaller.



JOE WOJCIK

In order to grow his practice, Michael Syme left Cohen & Grigsby in June to join Fox Rothschild as a partner.

“Every single one of my clients had no issue following me to Cohen & Grigsby; they’re delighted,” she said. “I have clients among the Fortune 25, but the very largest clients in the world seek out lawyers, not law firms. I know so many of the directors at Cohen, and I could trust them to provide the right support for my clients.”

Lawyers change firms for many reasons when it’s their choice, according to Robert Denney, who leads a namesake consulting business in the Philadelphia region but works with firms across the country. Larger footprint and deeper bench strength is frequently cited, as well as internal leadership and/or structural changes at the prior firm, elevated position, and lower and more competitive billing rates.

“Clients don’t want to overspend on legal fees if they don’t have to,” Anderson added.

Attorneys in Pittsburgh have never had more places to choose from, as homegrown firms continue to grow outside the region and out-of-town firms continue to set up shop here. In fact, three firms, of very different size, have established offices within the past six months — Philadelphia-based Cozen O’Connor; Columbus, Ohio-based Porter Wright Morris & Arthur LLP; and Weirton, W.Va.-based Recht Law Offices.

And established lawyers are increasingly willing to move their practices. Lateral flight occurred rarely into the mid-1990s, and when veteran attorneys left, it was almost always to start a firm of their own or to lead the Pittsburgh office of an outsider. But that’s changed. Several established lawyers at the partner level have changed firms this year after a decade or more at their previous firm.

“This is the first wave we’re seeing of lawyers who have grown up in the time when partners are moving,” said Lori Carpenter, CEO of Carpenter Legal Search, a recruitment firm focused on attorneys. “This is the group that’s comfortable with it. As their practices continue to grow and morph, they may feel the need to find a firm that makes sense for them in the next stage of their career.”

Robert Leight, a litigator at Pietragallo, Gordon, Alfano, Bosick & Raspanti LLP for more than 23 years, moved to Spilman Thomas & Battle PLLC’s Pittsburgh office in August. “I have a bizarre type of practice, split between white collar crime and toxic tort work,” he said, and the move better helped to coordinate between the two.

The toxic tort work led him to lots of work in West Virginia. Spilman is based in Charleston, W.Va., and has two other offices in the state, as well as in Roanoke, Va., and Winston-Salem, N.C. The southern scope and the expertise of Spilman’s lawyers “gave me a better opportunity to service clients in that area,” Leight said.

At the same time, Sharon Potter, chair of the firm’s white collar criminal defense and compliance group and member-in-charge of the Wheeling, W.Va., office, is a former U.S. attorney for the Northern District of West Virginia. Leight believes that connection will help him to further develop that part of his practice.

“It just became a natural fit for me,” Leight said. “I’m like most lawyers. You don’t set a course and say, ‘this is what I’m going to do.’ You take advantage of opportunities, and, if you do good work, your practice grows. That’s what happened with me.”

Some are attracted to new opportunities. Craig Heryford joined San Francisco-based Gordon Rees Scully Mansukhani LLP’s Pittsburgh office in July; he had been a shareholder and chair of the private equity group at Buchanan Ingersoll & Rooney PC, where he had worked for 33 years.

"I've never been a believer in firm hopping," Heryford said. "If you find a platform that works for you and your clients, you're just trading issues. But this firm presented a very dynamic, exciting opportunity."

Gordon & Rees tapped Heryford to co-chair its business services section and business transactions practice group. He is organizing and building a business strategy with an existing team of 30 lawyers and aims to triple the practice's size within five years through organic growth, cross-selling internally and hiring nationally.

"I've been to about half of our [45] offices, talking to the lawyers and leaders in those areas and working on growing our business practice," Heryford said. "I've collaborated with lawyers in Houston on a complicated and significant equity raise; I'm working on an M&A transaction with lawyers out of our Atlanta, Raleigh, N.C., and Orange County, Calif., offices, as well as from Pittsburgh and Chicago. It's a very collaborative law firm, open to new energy."

Another veteran attorney has the same sentiment about Heryford's former firm.

Buchanan hired Thomas Madigan to chair its firmwide construction practice group, leading a new approach to how the group works by expanding multidisciplinary services and creating teams for each stage of a particular project. Madigan had been at Pepper Hamilton LLP's Pittsburgh office for 11 years as a partner and before that had led the construction group at Cohen & Grigsby.

"I was part of a large construction practice group at Pepper, which was great, but there's something exciting about being the point person in a new venture," Madigan said. "It's one of those things that presents itself as an exciting opportunity. We all need those."

Wendy West Feinstein also said she changed firms when she saw a good opportunity come along. She joined Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP as a partner in the Philadelphia firm's Pittsburgh office. Previously, she co-chaired the 80-lawyer product liability group at Eckert Seamans Cherin & Mellott LLC, Pittsburgh's fourth-largest law firm.

"It seemed like a fabulous opportunity for me to join a truly global platform with an amazing group of litigators," Feinstein said. "It provided an opportunity to not only grow my practice, but provide other services that my prior firm did not have."

Soon after making the move to Morgan Lewis, she was contacted by a potential client in the Chicago area. Feinstein was selected and is now working with colleagues at Morgan Lewis offices in Chicago, New York and Philadelphia to service the client.

And although she's a frequent flyer, having a physical presence in so many cities has helped to reduce some of the travel required.

"With the firm having so much expertise and basically any practice area you can imagine, it's been a real pleasure to introduce my new partners to contacts I have in various companies and be able to say with confidence that these folks are really the top of their field," Feinstein said.

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