

Law360: Female Law Firm Founders Find What They're Looking

Law360 (August 23, 2022, 11:02 AM EDT) — When Massachusetts attorneys Elizabeth Halloran and Maura Tansley started their own law firm in 2021, their biggest concern was generating enough business. Now they worry about having enough staff to keep up.

"Learning how to be employers has been a big change and challenge for us," Halloran said. "Now we're actually employing others and are in a position where we're looking to continue to expand and bring on another attorney or support staff, growing exponentially in a way that I really didn't know we were capable of."

Women like Halloran and Tansley who started law firms amid the upheaval of the coronavirus pandemic acknowledged the challenges that come with growing a business even as they consider hiring more employees and expanding their legal offerings. They see these growing pains as well worth the chance to steer their own career and practice after the pandemic showed them that running a firm could be lucrative and liberating — and it's easier than they thought. "

It's really empowering," said Robin Cohen, chair of Cohen Ziffer Frenchman & McKenna LLP, a firm she co-founded with three male coworkers in January 2021. "And it's the happiest I've been professionally since I graduated law school."

More than half of recent law school graduates are women, but last year they made up only 38.9% of attorneys and 27.3% of partners at law firms surveyed for Law360 Pulse's Glass Ceiling Report: Women

in Law. The share of female attorneys and partners only increased by about a percentage point each since 2020.

And while women have nearly achieved parity with men at the associate level — making up 49.5% — the Glass Ceiling Report found that their numbers dwindle at the upper ranks of law firms. Just 33.1% of nonequity and 23.9% of equity partners are women, according to Law360 Pulse's survey.

Still, as the legal industry inches slowly toward gender equity, law firms started by women in recent years are growing and thriving, at least partially due to the unique perspectives and policies of their female founders. Those who launched law firms since the pandemic began said serving in management positions has increased their ability to recruit and retain other women.

"We're attracting a great group of women," Cohen said. "It makes a difference to a lot of women when you have a woman chair ... Firms really have tried to make it equal, but when you have a firm that's run by a woman, a lot of those subtleties go out the window."

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