



LAW FIRM LEADERS

CEOs and managing partners, partners-in-charge and practice leaders talk about the challenges of leadership in law firms.

BY GRACE RENSHAW

Law firm leaders face a plethora of challenges. All manage the tasks of motivating attorneys and staff at all levels, recruiting the right professionals and fostering their professional development. All address the issues inherent with governing a firm, group or office, including dealing with office space, overhead, technology, hiring, compensation, and employee benefits and relations. The recent recession was a game-changer that required leaders at all levels to hone their strategic plans and identify what drives

economic performance in various practice groups. Many also meet the daily challenge of balancing their professional responsibilities as lawyers with their leadership responsibilities.

In this section, 13 Vanderbilt Law alumni who have founded their own firms or taken on the roles of managing partner, practice group leader, or partner-in-charge of an office talk about the specific challenges they've encountered as law firm leaders.

the questions posed by the intersection of technology and intellectual property law. If you were 50 and had been practicing law for 25 years, you didn't know any more about it than someone two years out of law school."

Hill had attended the first Internet law institute in San Francisco in 1996 and immediately recognized the advantage of choosing to focus on a growth area of law. After forming his own firm at age 29, he immediately began devoting the time he had formerly spent serving other attorneys' clients to business development. He also developed a competitive billing structure. "My clients had been paying a five-year associate rate," he said. "I raised my rates, but I sold my clients on the fact that the increase was reasonable. That helped me increase my revenue by about 20 percent."

Hill also brought in two large infringement cases—one copyright, one patent—in his first year. "They say it's never easier to get clients than in your first year, because your friends and family are worried about you and send you referrals," he said. By the time he was 30, Hill had more than \$1 million a year in portable business.

Now a nationally respected intellectual property lawyer with a global practice, Hill has defended the Hooters of America trademark for over a decade; he recently won a \$1 million infringement judgment for Hooters. Past and present clients also include GE Medical Systems, Comverse Network Systems, MOSAID Technologies, Martha Stewart, Emeril Lagasse and Moe's Southwestern Grill. In addition to defending clients against trademark and copyright infringement, he oversees the licensing

of millions of dollars' worth of patents, copyrights and trademarks each year.

More recently, Hill was lead counsel in obtaining a \$1.88 million jury verdict in a copyright infringement case tried before U.S. District Judge Charles Pannell. Since that victory, Judge Pannell has twice selected Hill to serve as a special master in trademark cases, submitting written reports and recommendations to the judge as disputes arise. "The special master work is a terrific opportunity to experience litigation as judges experience it," Hill says.

Hill's success did not come without stumbles. When he took his first contingency case in 2002, "I did not foresee that I was going to have to put \$600,000 of my money and my partner's money up to fund the cost of five experts and everything else it was going to take," Hill said. "If we hadn't been able to invest enough to take the case to trial, the outcome wouldn't have been nearly as good." The case settled during trial, with the defendant paying a premium.

Hill began taking contingency patent cases after losing two major clients when they were acquired by larger corporations. "We actually grew through the loss of those clients," Hill said, "and the revenue that was financing our growth was largely fueled by contingency fee patent litigation. To achieve that growth, we had to be willing to put our money where our mouth was and take some risk—potentially that we could take a big fat zero." To hedge its risk, the firm added a partner with a corporate and transactional practice. As Hill, Kertscher & Wharton (HKW), the 10-lawyer firm is now balanced between hourly litigation and contingency work.

HKW weathered its worst year in 2009. "That was the year we saw the effects of the recession," Hill said. Since then, business has picked up, and Hill and his partners have mapped out a plan for careful growth. "We would rather grow through our internal resources," Hill said. "A small law firm is like an extension of your family. You know everybody, their spouses and significant others, and their kids. It's a place you want to be. We want people to be excited to work here because that's where their friends are."

Ann Huckstep '78



**Partner and Former
Managing Partner
Adams and Reese**

Ann Huckstep
became Birmingham,
Alabama-based Lange

Simpson Robinson & Somerville's first managing partner by asking for the job. One of Lange Simpson's major clients, Regions Bank, was growing rapidly, and Lange Simpson had 50 attorneys at two offices in Birmingham and Huntsville. "We didn't have the bench strength or geographic reach to represent that client as best we should," said Huckstep. "We needed to expand."

Huckstep proposed to Lange Simpson's executive committee that she become chairwoman of the firm's executive committee and act as the firm's first managing partner. "That was a shift for us," she said. Huckstep began her first term as managing partner by exploring options for growth and vetting potential merger partners, devoting the next

several years to finding a regional firm with the right geographic presence, cultural fit, expertise and interest in merging with Lange Simpson. In 2003, she guided her firm through a successful merger with Adams and Reese; the combined firm had more than 250 attorneys in seven offices throughout the Southeast. Huckstep stepped down as managing partner of Lange Simpson when the merger was finalized, but continued to serve on the executive committee of Adams and Reese.

In September 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit, devastating the firm's large New Orleans office, where a third of its attorneys were based. "We were on track to have a great year," Huckstep recalls. "We became experts in disaster relief; 100 percent of our people in New Orleans were homeless immediately."

The firm quickly opened an office in Baton Rouge for their displaced lawyers. "Katrina taught us a lot about survival, nimbleness and recovery," Huckstep said. "When the financial meltdown occurred in 2008, we were prepared and did not experience the hardships that many firms did, because we had done the hard work in 2005 and had come through that time as a much stronger, more focused firm."

Between 2004 and 2006, Huckstep was heavily involved in Adams and Reese's merger with Nashville-based Stokes Bartholomew and its acquisition of lawyers from Memphis-based Armstrong Allen, which extended the firm's reach into new markets. Huckstep's experience in merging Lange Simpson with Adams and Reese enabled her to connect with the leaders of both firms

and understand their issues and concerns.

Huckstep was elected chairwoman of the Adams and Reese executive committee in 2007 and again in 2008. During that time, the firm focused on strategic planning, growth and expansion of its practice areas, seeking to better leverage its specialties and bench strength across all offices.

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Under her leadership, the firm also focused on the establishment of a new set of core values. "In a law firm, your assets go down the elevator each evening," she said. "To be successful, you have to keep people engaged, happy, and in the practice of law at your firm. We worked hard to develop our values, and they are really important to us. They spell 'GREAT IF I (foster our values)'—Growth, Respect, Excellence, Accountability, Teamwork, Inclusion, Fulfillment and Integrity."

Kelly Mathis '88



Founding Partner Mathis & Murphy

Nine years ago, **Kelly Mathis** made what appeared to be a risky decision. A named partner in a Florida firm, he decided to "step out on my own. I was partner number six of

six, and I wanted to lead my own firm."

Mathis' risk paid off. After a year working alone with one legal assistant, he recruited James Murphy, a former assistant state attorney who had been an associate at his prior firm. Today, Mathis & Murphy is a thriving Jacksonville-based business, insurance and medical malpractice litigation firm with a niche specialty—sweepstakes work—that attracts national clients.

Mathis was well-established in the Jacksonville legal market when he founded his own firm. However, he found his first year in business extremely challenging. "I knew how to be a lawyer," he said. "But I knew nothing about running a business. I had to learn by trial and error—how to equip the office, do billing and payroll, and project my overhead and how much income I needed."

Fortunately, Mathis excelled at attracting good clients, which in turn attracted good lawyers to his firm. He cites community involvement as key to his success. Already active in the Jacksonville Bar Association, Mathis served on its board and ultimately as its president, involvement which generated a significant number of referrals. "There were about 2,000 lawyers in the association, and I worked in practice areas that not everyone did," Mathis said. "The visibility helped tremendously with getting my name out."

Mathis & Murphy now has seven attorneys, and Mathis has a long list of cases he's successfully litigated through appeals. "You can't sit in your office waiting for the phone to ring," Mathis said. "You've got to get out and get involved in the community. That's the best marketing you can do."