

## Ex-BigLaw Chair: 'You Can't Outgrow Your Infrastructure'

By **Aebra Coe**

Law360 (March 5, 2025, 12:40 PM EST) -- After the law firm he founded in 2001, Goldberg Segalla LLP, saw massive growth under his two decades of leadership, Richard J. "RJ" Cohen Sr. said one major lesson he learned is that law firms need to ensure they don't outgrow their infrastructure and administrative teams.

Growth needs to be strategic and needs to happen at a pace that allows for the internal workings of the law firm to keep up, something not all firms today adhere to in a growth-hungry legal industry, Cohen said in an interview with Law360 Pulse.

His former law firm, Buffalo, New York-based Goldberg Segalla, grew from **177 lawyers** to **433 lawyers** between 2014 and 2024, according to the Law360 400.

Cohen retired from the practice of law in 2021, only to return earlier this year as a founding member **of a new 75-lawyer law firm**, Philadelphia-based Cohen Vaughan LLP, alongside some of his former colleagues at Goldberg Segalla and others.



Richard J. Cohen

He said he learned a number of lessons during his first go-around as a law firm founder that he'll draw from with the new firm. Among them: To ensure growth is sustainable, hire the best administrative staff and appoint the right leaders to lead that growth, and reward team-spiritedness and contributions that move the firm forward rather than simply business generation.

Here is the full conversation with Cohen as he reflected on a 35-year career in law and more than two decades as a firm leader.

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

### **You've been very busy since stepping down as Goldberg Segalla's chair, including founding a brand-new law firm. What inspired you to engage in a second round as a law firm founder in your retirement?**

I left Goldberg Segalla during the pandemic to find balance in my life. I have nine children and I was on call 24/7, 365 in my work life for more than 20 years. So in 2021 I joined a firm in the Southeast. It was a very similar firm to the one that I built and I had a relationship with the founders of that firm. The intention was that I would move down to the Carolinas to be closer to the nerve center of that firm, but I couldn't figure out how to pull it off, mostly because of logistical reasons and because of my children's needs. So it ended up not being the fit that I thought it would be and I retired in February of last year.

And I didn't think that I was going to go and start another firm, but there were a number of folks I was in the midst of recruiting from [Goldberg Segalla] to the Southeast firm when I left it. And I had conversations with them and we were [regretful] about the fact that we wouldn't get to work together. And I'm not sure exactly how it happened, to be very candid, but we ended up talking

about the possibility of finding a way to work together, and here we are.

## **So here you are having recently founded a new law firm, a relatively small firm. How is the legal environment different today than it was 20 years ago? And how does that impact the experience of a firm like Cohen Vaughan versus the experience of starting Goldberg Segalla in the early aughts?**

I don't know how the practice of law or the marketplace for engaging in that practice differs. For me, the difference is 25 years of having done this before. I was 37 years old when I started the first firm and I had no idea what I was doing at that time. But it's a lot easier this time based on 25 years of having done it and based on the fact that the core group of founders is a very dynamic group. Everybody in the core group, or almost everybody in that core group, is a generation younger than me, so I don't have to carry the weight of the world on my shoulders like I did the first time. It was a function of all the lessons that I've learned over 25 years of running and growing and managing a law firm that I was able to put to good use. And those experiences and those lessons that I learned I think are going to serve us very well because this group won't have to go through a lot of the consequences of things that didn't work out the first time because of the experiences I had.

## **What are a couple examples of the biggest lessons that you learned that you're planning to implement with the new firm?**

There are so many of them. I learned a tremendous amount from all the successes that we had over the years, but I definitely learned more from the hiccups that developed. One of the things, just by way of example, I learned from the first experience is that the administrative team is more important than anything else. In fact, I think the administrative core is more important than the founding ownership core.

And so, [with the founding of Cohen Vaughan] we worked very hard to find the highest level of administrative leadership that we knew and trusted. There were a couple of occasions, particularly in the early stages, the first time around where I think that our evolution as a law firm overwhelmed the administration that we had in place. And so one of those lessons that I learned from that experience is that you can't outgrow your infrastructure, because there's much more consequence than there is benefit from that. We recognize that the handful of C-suite executive leaders at the core of this firm are the highest caliber that we could find, and we are very pleased about the fact that they have taken a leap of faith in us.

## **Midsize and large law firms have grown at a really rapid rate over the past few decades. What do you think some of the implications of that rapid growth are, and how is it changing the industry?**

With respect to the client community that I have been involved in over the 35 years of my career, I think that there is definitely a view toward trying to find larger firms that have a more expansive reach. And so I think, as a result of that, there's been a proliferation of growth in the legal industry. There are more firms that are looking to grow so that they can more capably service the client community in more practice areas and in a broader geographic footprint.

There have been a number of firms I've noticed, particularly over the last five or six years, that have grown extremely rapidly. I'm not sure that they're all going to ultimately benefit from that. Because, I think, some of them — I think my prior firm experienced this a little bit, particularly in the early stages — spend too much of their time investing in growth for the sake of growth as opposed to attacking it more strategically. That's been a major topic of conversation in the leadership group of this firm. We're only seven weeks old right now and we want to position ourselves to take advantage of the opportunities that our client community wants to provide to us, but we have no desire to grow beyond our infrastructure and no desire to add lawyers or add staff or expand our footprint unless it's for the right reason, at the right time and around the right people. I'm not so sure that that's the case on an industrywide basis.

## **What's something you learned from your time leading a large law firm that, looking back, you'd want to share with today's law firm leaders?**

I would say that it's extremely important to develop a leadership core that has the ability to rise to the occasion and not to promote people who are not leaders into leadership positions. I think that when you do look to recruit leaders, whether they're practice leaders or firm leaders or office leaders, try to find leaders and catalysts who don't have an ego, or can put their egos aside.

There are a lot of leaders who let their heart get in the way of their brain. And I think it's important to have a big heart, but ultimately you've got to be able to divorce yourself from the emotion of the decisions that you're making and not let your heart get in the way of your brain. I think leaders — and this is something that I learned firsthand — have to learn how to say no. I wanted to be as helpful to as many people as I could be, and sometimes you just can't do everything that everybody wants to do.

I think internally, firms should reward leadership and team-spiritedness above everything else. A management committee or an executive committee of a law firm should really be a strategic think tank. They don't work if you don't have people who are there on merit. I've been involved in too much of that, where some of the people who grow into leadership positions have done so through inertia or by fiat. And I do think that you should put your best leaders in the leadership positions, and if they can't make a committee or group better as a result of being on it, then they shouldn't be there.

**I know I've heard this concept of, typically in law firms it's the lawyers who are good at being lawyers and building a big book of business that are put into leadership positions, which sometimes translates and sometimes doesn't. You may be a great lawyer, but you're not necessarily a good leader.**

I think that's absolutely true. I actually have an unusual philosophy about elevating lawyers into equity partner positions or leadership positions. I know that the prevailing view is that it's the book of business, ultimately, that earns lawyers the right to move into either equity or leadership positions. I feel very strongly that the people who should be elevated to those levels are the people who are going to make contributions in that little room or in that little community that are going to make both the room and, as a result of their presence, the firm better. There are a lot of excellent lawyers who are not great leaders. I think that the people who should be put into the leadership positions in any business entity, including law firms, are the ones that have the ability to carry the firm both in the present and into its strategic future.

**Looking forward, what lessons do you hope the legal industry will learn, to bring it into the next decade and beyond as a thriving profession?**

I don't think people enroll in law school for the same reason they did 20 or 30 years ago. My fellow founding partners and I have the unique opportunity and privilege of creating a very specific law firm vision, without being bogged down by inertia or baggage. We spent a fair amount of time thinking about what we wanted to accomplish going forward, what it would take to get there, and how to navigate around what might get in our way. I think our ability to succeed in capturing that vision, and in fact, the future of our profession as a whole, depends on embracing diverse leadership, prioritizing legal ethics, and innovating responsibly. Strong firms thrive through collaboration and interdisciplinary experience. We also view our legal ethics not just as a requirement, but as a competitive advantage that builds trust, and we are committed to modernizing the profession without compromising integrity.

By fostering a culture of well-being and accountability for our entire team, we are confident that our firm will help the legal industry evolve into a more sustainable, client-centered and thriving profession. And as I mentioned earlier, most of our core leadership is a generation younger than I am, each of whom I initially recruited when they were in their 20s or 30s. Developing the next generation of lawyers isn't just a goal; it's a necessity. That includes not only creating a professional environment that young lawyers can thrive in, but exposing lawyers to the areas of practice that interest them, because you are much more likely to invest yourself in, and to attain success in, the things you enjoy than the things you don't enjoy.

There's so much gamesmanship and dysfunction in this profession. I hope more law firms strive to understand the kind of environment that lawyers and other professionals want to work in, not just for the money, but for camaraderie, safety, training, exposure, and any other reason that is compelling.

--Editing by Robert Rudinger.

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