

Law Firm Leaders: Kramer Levin's Schoeman And Spilko

By **Xiumei Dong**

Law360 (December 9, 2020, 5:05 PM EST) -- Paul Schoeman and Howard Spilko started serving as co-managing partners of Kramer Levin Naftalis & Frankel LLP on Jan. 1, taking the reins from Paul Pearlman, who had led the firm since 2000 as managing partner.

Here, Schoeman and Spilko talk to Law360 about how the firm is navigating the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic, how it has evolved over the past decade, and its strategy for talent retention as a large midsize law firm.

This interview was recorded on Nov. 12 and has been edited for length and clarity.

You started in your new roles shortly before the pandemic hit the U.S. How has your firm grappled with the crisis and how is it adjusting the way it conducts business?

Schoeman: Obviously, this has been a challenging year for everyone, and it's a challenging year to move into the co-managing partner role. I'll say that Howard and I are both extremely proud of the way that the firm has responded, and people have really pulled together and stepped up and shown what we can do as a firm.

The firm is having very good results. After some initial challenges, our productivity has been strong. We've demonstrated that we're able to do the kinds of things that we did before the pandemic, which is to deliver high-quality legal services to our clients, to be very attentive to our client's needs, and to have a real culture of collaboration.

I would say, somewhat paradoxically, the fact of the pandemic and the fact that we're working remotely has forced us to focus on connecting and collaborating with our colleagues and our clients. So, we've done a lot of very regular town halls with our partners and with the associates and staff. We have a lot of virtual events. We have a frequent newsletter that we send around. These are the kinds of things that we have done to maintain our culture and particularly to emphasize the collaboration that we think is key to our success.



Paul Schoeman



Howard Spilko

Kramer Levin
co-managing partners

Spilko: We had the opportunity to see how our administrative staff works, and we have been so impressed. It is not an easy endeavor to manage the firm during this crisis, particularly with remote working. We have relied heavily on our senior staff to help us through this, most notably, Mat Rosswood, who is our chief operating officer. We're very fortunate to have senior-level managing directors throughout the firm across all of our disciplines, who are sharp and able to help us manage the firm.

The firm has gone through many changes since it was founded in 1968, but how has it evolved in the past decade?

Spilko: We added our Silicon Valley office in 2011. That office is focused on patent trials, and this is one of our destination practices, where we have a very significant presence in the market that attracts clients and talent to the firm. In fact, we just won the **largest patent litigation judgment ever**, in the first-ever zoom trial a couple of weeks ago. This was the Centripetal Networks vs. Cisco case where we represented Centripetal. That was an enormous development for the firm.

And then, we have gone through a management transition, where our longtime former managing partner Paul Pearlman stepped down, retired at the end of 2019, and our executive director Nick Tortorella, who had been with the firm for 18 years, had stepped down as well. So, Paul Schoeman and I took over the responsibilities on Jan. 1, and Mat Rosswood joined us in October of 2019 to take over the new role as chief operating officer of the firm.

Kramer Levin has three offices, in New York, Paris and Silicon Valley. What's the firm's reason for having your offices in these three geographies, and are there any other locations you're considering?

Spilko: With regards to our Paris office, we had always worked towards an office outside of the United States, and we were lucky enough to be approached by some partners in our current Paris office when they were part of Rogers & Wells. Clifford Chance was seeking to take over Rogers & Wells, and this office had wanted to not do that. They came to us and they asked if we would combine with them, and we did that.

The Silicon Valley office opened about 10 years ago. That was a function of just a lateral recruiting effort with Paul Andre and Lisa Kobialka, the heads of the practice out there. We decided to make the investment in them and in the practice, and that required investment in opening up an office. In terms of the strategic outlook as to opening up offices elsewhere, that is not in our current plan. We're very happy with the geographical footprint that we have today, and we would anticipate keeping that for now.

Schoeman: We think, based on the strength that we have as a firm, that we have a presence both nationally and somewhat internationally. Certainly, in the United States, we litigate in courts all over the country. We do deals — corporate deals, real estate deals — all over the country. We found it's not necessary for us to have a physical presence in every region or geography to be able to represent our clients in those areas.

As a roughly 375-lawyer firm, what is your approach to attracting and retaining that talent?

Spilko: Our focus from a strategic standpoint has been to build out our destination practices, and we call them that because they are market-leading practices that generate client demand. [There is] a lot of excitement from talented people to join the firm in those practices, and to grow professionally and be

part of something that's exciting and growing. We recognize that our people are our most important asset, and in essence, everybody's a volunteer because they can leave at any time. So, we are very focused on maintaining the culture of the firm, which is grounded in cooperation and also being entrepreneurs.

We also have a very good culture in terms of not having bureaucracy. Things get done here. It's a very flat organizational structure, and everybody has access to the managing partners if they want to. We are a small enough firm where there's a real culture of everybody knowing each other, and we feel like we're part of the family, which really helps in terms of our ability to recruit people and also to retain talented people.

What are your goals for the firm over the next five years?

Spilko: One of the great things about our firm is that we work on exciting and sophisticated projects with premier clients. Our goal is to continue that and expand upon that consistent with our strategy to focus on our destination practices and grow them out. The other goal is to maintain the culture of the firm. It attracts people to the firm and keeps people at the firm. Our attorneys and staff feel like they're part of something special, and that's in part because of the size of the firm and the fact that we know each other and that we care about each other. That really is the secret to our success. So, I think those two principles are the guiding light for us and inform everything we do to move the firm forward.

Schoeman: Howard and I are also very committed to developing and mentoring younger talent, both partners and associates. We enjoy helping younger lawyers reach their potential. It's an exciting time for the firm. We have a lot of great talent and a lot of people who are starting to reach their potential. It's going to be a real pleasure as co-managing partners, over the next few years, to watch some of our younger lawyers really develop and take off. We take a lot of pride in that.

If you could have lunch with any lawyer, alive or dead, who would it be?

Schoeman: I'm going to give you the answer that I think is probably the most popular answer, maybe particularly right now. I would say I would love to have lunch with Abraham Lincoln, who was a lawyer and obviously known for his life after being a lawyer. Anytime you can have lunch with Abraham Lincoln would be a blast, but I also think that he was a leader who faced a lot of challenges. I think both as a co-managing partner of a law firm and just given the challenges we face in our country, it would be fascinating to have lunch with Abraham Lincoln.

Spilko: My choice would be Franklin D. Roosevelt. I most admired his vision in navigating the country out of the Great Depression and through World War II, and doing it all while battling through his physical disabilities. He did it with great courage and discipline.

--Editing by Aaron Pelc.