

Kilpatrick's New SF Head Enjoys Thrill Of Patent Work 'Puzzle'

By James Mills

Law360 (January 23, 2026, 10:03 AM EST) -- With experiences as both a patent engineer and a lawyer, Kilpatrick's new San Francisco leader, Neslihan "Nesli" Doran-Civan, is thrilled to bridge the gap between both backgrounds in her work at the firm.

"It really is like putting the pieces of the puzzle together," Doran-Civan said.

"Understanding the inventions, talking with the inventors, that's tapping into the engineering side," she went on. "Understanding the lingo when you speak with them and being excited about the problem that they are solving and going back and translating that into a document that one day a jury can read and understand, that's the lawyer part of me."



Neslihan Doran-Civan

About a dozen years after she joined Kilpatrick Townsend & Stockton LLP, Doran-Civan became office managing partner of the San Francisco shop on Jan. 1, following the retirement of patent prosecutor April Isaacson, who had been the office managing partner for four years.

In leading the office — which includes about 100 staff members, roughly half of them attorneys — Doran-Civan said she is looking to help it grow, while also keeping "the office culture intact."

"We have a great group of people here. I would say the culture is based on collegiality, inclusivity and mutual support," Doran-Civan said. "While growing the office, the aim should be that we keep these qualities."

Law360 Pulse chatted with Doran-Civan about how she came to be office managing partner in San Francisco, what she plans to do in the role and the unique way she stumbled into patent work.

This interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.

Congratulations on becoming office managing partner. How did it come about?

Back in the summer, our previous office managing partner, April Isaacson, shared with me that she had decided to retire at the end of the year. We are neighbors in the office; her office was next door to mine. She said, "I need to recommend someone in my place and I think that someone should be you." I was very honored and excited about that. Of course, I said, "I'll be happy to." She shared that recommendation with the firm management. And the management and leadership reached out to me. I

was excited to see they were on board and they thought it was a good idea. That's how I was nominated.

Is being an office managing partner something to which you were aspiring? Did you have any previous fantasies about being an OMP?

I didn't think about it. It was not something I was pining for, but I also was not necessarily shocked. One of the reasons I joined Kilpatrick in 2014, when I looked at the emphasis they had on growth paths for women attorneys, I liked it. Mehrnaz Boroumand Smith was the office managing partner at the time, that was one of the good-to-see things. When you're joining the firm and you're looking at their leadership and you see someone who looks like you, who has similar background, you think, "OK, this could be me someday." That part was always in the back of my mind, or just the fact it was an available path to me was good, but it wasn't necessarily something I was working toward. For all of our attorneys at Kilpatrick, when you're working in your career, when you're doing a good job, you're also in parallel walking in the same path as those positions.

When April shared that with me [about possibly becoming office managing partner], I went back to Mehrnaz; she's one of my mentors at the firm. She said: "Great, go for it. You should definitely do it." We talked about it, what it means, what the role is. It sounded like it was a very good opportunity.

What qualities did April see in you that made her think you'd be a good leader?

I get along with the people in our office pretty well. I try to be fair. April used to discuss things with me, get my opinion on certain decisions she had to make. She had her own idea, but would use me as a sounding board. She always said my feedback was fair and just. I think that is probably why she thought I would be a good person to follow in her steps.

What are your plans for the office?

The idea is to continue what April started during her tenure as office managing partner, to grow the office and do so with the strategy growth plan of Kilpatrick. I will work with our management and leadership to discuss in which directions we should go. In doing that, I want to keep the office culture intact. We have a great group of people here. I would say the culture is based on collegiality, inclusivity and mutual support. While growing the office, the aim should be that we keep these qualities.

What are the major practice groups within the San Francisco office?

Intellectual property with patent prosecutors, trademark and patent litigators is the largest group here. We like to see ourselves as an IP powerhouse. [Kilpatrick has 670 attorneys firmwide and about 300 of them are IP attorneys.]

The largest sections within IP are patent prosecution and trademark. Next, we have labor and employment. We have complex litigation. And capital markets.

Tell us about your background.

I'm from Turkey originally. I grew up there, I went to college there. I studied aerospace engineering. I came to the United States in 2002 to pursue my master's degree in aerospace engineering at MIT. That was post-9/11, not a great environment for noncitizens in the aerospace industry. So, I pivoted. I did

another master's at MIT to see how I could use my engineering degree in other settings. I did a master's in technology and policy program, which had an IP section. That's how I get acquainted with patent laws, engineers pivoting into law. I graduated and started working as a patent engineer at a boutique IP law firm [Lahive & Cockfield LLP] in Boston.

When I decided this was the career for me — the firm was happy with me, I was happy at the firm — so I continued as a patent agent, as a registered patent agent with the [U.S. Patent and Trademark Office] and went to law school [at Suffolk University Law School in Boston] at night. I did that for four years. I graduated in 2011 and joined Lahive & Cockfield as an associate. Meanwhile, the firm merged with Nelson Mullins. So, I was with the same team, just that we merged with a larger firm.

In 2014, I decided to move to San Francisco. That was more a family-based decision. I got married in 2011. My husband is also from Turkey. He was unhappy with shoveling snow so much. We decided to move to San Francisco. Kilpatrick was pretty much the logical choice for an IP practitioner. I applied and I joined the firm as a lateral associate in 2014.

Why do you enjoy patent work? Why is it so satisfying?

I think I'm equal parts engineer and equal parts lawyer now. Bridging that gap between the two sides is the thrilling part. It really is like putting the pieces of the puzzle together. Understanding the inventions, talking with the inventors, that's tapping into the engineering side. Understanding the lingo when you speak with them and being excited about the problem that they are solving and going back and translating that into a document that one day a jury can read and understand, that's the lawyer part of me. Solving that puzzle keeps it interesting.

Also, the fact that with patent prosecution, you work with different clients, different technologies. So, in my portfolio, we have fintech, we have gaming software, have eVTOL [electric vertical take-off and landing], which are these vertical takeoff/landing aircraft. There's this variety of technology that I get to work on. That keeps it interesting and exciting.

--Editing by Robert Rudinger.