

Kilpatrick's San Francisco head: reduced hours are not a 'punitive exile'

Kilpatrick's managing partner for San Francisco discusses taking the longer route to partnership, the importance of female mentors, and strengthening office culture

In early January, Kilpatrick Townsend & Stockton announced that Nesli Doran-Civan had been named managing partner of the firm's San Francisco office.

Doran-Civan tells Managing IP that she felt ready to assume the responsibilities of managing partner after practising at the firm for more than a decade.

Originally from Türkiye and with a background in aerospace engineering, Doran-Civan shares how she fell into the intellectual property legal industry.

She sat down with Managing IP for our 'Women in IP' series to discuss balancing the challenges of motherhood with excelling professionally, and how she eventually became managing partner. She also explains why company culture is vital.

Prolonged road

Doran-Civan notes that before her IP career, her studies had a strong tech focus.

She graduated from Istanbul Technical University with a degree in aerospace engineering. That inspired her to further her studies in the US at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).



"Through my studies at MIT, I learned about the importance of IP protection for innovation and decided to become a patent attorney."

Doran-Civan's time at MIT sparked her interest in patent law, leading her to attend Suffolk University School of Law in Boston. There she attended the school's IP night programme, while working as a patent agent during the day.

Pursuing patent law led Doran-Civan to find her passion for working at the intersection of technology, law, and business.

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While her progression has proved fruitful, it has not been without obstacles.

She notes that her greatest challenge arose shortly after having her son. This drove her to reduce her work hours, which in turn prompted a longer track toward partnership.

“It was difficult seeing my colleagues move more quickly through their career trajectory,” she recalls, adding that, during that time, her women mentors acted as her guiding compass.

“First, they understood what I was going through and helped me see both the process and my emotional reaction to it as normal and common. Second, they offered practical advice for juggling all my responsibilities.”

She adds: “Third, they were role models, showing me that the reduced hours track is not some punitive exile but a real and sustainable path to partnership.”

Tough decisions

Despite encountering challenges in her career path, Doran-Civan worked her way up to a leadership position at Kilpatrick.

She says that she worked closely with her predecessor, April Issacson, the firm’s previous managing partner for San Francisco, to learn the specifics of the role.

“April would routinely seek my opinion on the issues that were on her plate. Through these discussions, I learned the hidden aspects of the managing partner role and the intricacies of being an effective leader of a dynamic office.”

When Issacson announced her retirement, she asked Doran-Civan to take over the role.

“I accepted because I knew that I was well prepared to lead the office,” says Doran-Civan.

Before leaving, Issacson imparted some guidance on Doran-Civan on what it takes to be an effective leader.

“By nature, I’m a very friendly person, and I tend to treat all my colleagues as friends. April cautioned me that there will be situations in which I would have to assume the role of a manager and maybe make decisions that not everyone will like.”

She adds: “While there hasn’t yet been a need to implement this advice, I’m always aware that my role is

different now and I keep April’s wise words in mind.”

After settling into the role, Doran-Civan says she is routinely involved in overseeing office operations and social cohesion, along with helping drive recruitment for the San Francisco office.

On the practice side, Doran-Civan is expanding her work in autonomous vehicles, medical devices, and software technologies.

“IP for autonomous vehicles is surging right now, including autonomous aircraft, and it’s exciting to be a part of this brand-new technology because the patent landscape is changing very rapidly in this area.”

She adds: “With more mature industries, we often protect incremental inventions and advancements. But here, we’re working at the inception of a whole industry, and covering foundational IP, and that’s very rewarding.”

‘Robust office culture’

While administrative duties, patent work, and recruiting take up a large portion of Doran-Civan’s day-to-day tasks, she emphasises that fostering a positive work environment and expanding community outreach for the firm’s partners are also priorities.

“The more informal contacts there are between colleagues, the more robust the office’s culture is. So, we’re having more lunches together and community volunteering events.”

She adds that she often brings in speakers to discuss important topics with the office to encourage a more community-oriented team. Speakers have included experts on recycling guidelines and firefighters who outlined earthquake and fire safety.

Building a productive and friendly group is front of mind for Doran-Civan, especially when participating in recruiting events.

She notes that mentoring aspiring IP lawyers is important, since many young professionals have not been fully exposed to the IP space.

“I encourage graduate students in STEM – especially women – to consider a career in IP because many people still don’t know what IP lawyers do or whether this is a good career choice for them.”

She adds: “Whenever I speak to a scientist considering IP law as a career, I make sure to be very frank and give

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an unvarnished view of the day-to-day, both the pluses and the minuses.”

Doran-Civan says that finding women attorneys as mentors has been the key to her success, and she urges other women in the IP space to do the same.

“I know that it sometimes feels like there aren’t enough hours in the day to even do all the work on your desk, but these connections are essential for a successful career, and you should try to make them a priority.”



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