

## Robinson & Cole Leader On Finding Firm's 'Secret Sauce'

By Christine DeRosa

*Law360 (May 29, 2025, 12:56 PM EDT)* -- After nearly 35 years at Robinson & Cole LLP, and four years as managing partner, Rhonda Tobin says she's learned well that the firm's "secret sauce" is its people, something she told Law360 Pulse that she always keeps in mind.

Tobin has spent her entire career at Robinson & Cole, joining the firm right after her graduation from Duke University School of Law. She had previously been a summer associate at a few firms in both Connecticut and Philadelphia, where she's originally from, but said she eventually realized she wanted to do litigation at a bigger firm.



Rhonda Tobin

"Frankly, Robinson & Cole was my first choice, and happily that worked out," Tobin said. "I had gotten an offer to come as a 2L for the summer and opted to go to a smaller firm, but when I knew I wanted litigation in a big firm, it really was my top choice."

Apart from the firm's size and its well-known litigation department, Tobin said she was also attracted to Robinson & Cole because of its people. She interviewed with a different set of firm staffers as a 2L and a 3L, but in both cases, she said they stressed that a big reason they were there was the people.

"That was really a big part of it for me. I was moving into Connecticut where I didn't have friends and family and I needed a bit of a home, and that's what I got when I interviewed with people," Tobin said. "Sept. 4 will be 35 years. It's the same reason I'm still here."

Tobin recently told Law360 Pulse how the people at Robinson & Cole are integral to both firm culture and her job, and the challenges that came with becoming managing partner in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. The following interview has been edited for length and clarity.

### **You've worked at Robinson & Cole for your entire legal career. What's kept you there for nearly 35 years?**

I think that people are our secret sauce. I could go on and on about the things I love about the firm, but it starts with the people. I've been here 35 years, and there's lots of others who have been here for 40, 30, 25 and 20. It's not that unusual, and we hire people with the hopes that they'll spend their career with us.

We have people who were summer associates with us and then graduated and stayed. We still hire a lot of laterals, as all firms do, and not everybody stays. But when we talk to laterals, we do get a lot of questions about our culture and how collaborative we are, because usually they're looking to leave another firm where they're not finding that home or those people who want to collaborate with them.

You perpetuate a culture by hiring people who buy into it, so when we're looking at laterals, it's people who we think will be a good fit. We were at 110 lawyers, and now we've grown to 265 lawyers during my 35 years. We're different — we're bigger now, and we're in more geographic areas — but it feels like the same place to me, because we've tried to attract the people who want that place where they can both have a successful career and find their people.

### **When did you take on your first leadership role with the firm?**

I was a third-year associate when they asked me to be one of the summer associate program coordinators, which is how a lot of our associates start getting some leadership opportunities. I got active with the hiring committee, and then from there it was some random things.

As a senior associate, we had a work-life balance task force and I was asked to chair that. Then it was different committees, different initiatives. Ultimately, in 2007, I was asked to co-chair our litigation department, which was about 100 lawyers at the time. I did that until I became managing partner in 2021.

In 2009, an interesting time to become a law firm leader with the recession, I joined the managing committee. A new managing partner, John Lynch, had been elected, and he was the right person for the time. He was a business lawyer and all firms needed some business savvy to figure out what we were going to do with the decrease in demand and increase in expenses. It was challenging, but you get through it by building support among your partners and everyone at the firm that understands what the firm's trying to do.

When I look back, there were natural progressions of different leadership roles. I think one thing that really helps with that is, being here for 35 years and having those opportunities, I got to know the firm and its people really well. I didn't have a grand plan to become a managing partner and I don't think people necessarily should. I think it should be something that you are happy to do to serve the firm, but not necessarily a goal in itself.

### **Did you use any lessons you learned from 2009 when you became managing partner in 2021?**

Every one. I served in the managing committee with John Lynch for seven years, and then Steve Goldman was the managing partner before me for five years, so I learned a lot of lessons from both of them.

Going through the turmoil of early 2009 and then picking up in the middle of the pandemic when we were still remote, I think there's some real lessons in being transparent with your people and building consensus about what you're trying to do. I lead by consensus. I'm a partner, just like all the other partners at the firm.

It's really important, especially in challenging times, to be transparent, and then if people don't agree with your decisions, at least they know that you're trying to do the right thing.

Steve Goldman had to take us into the pandemic. We used to joke that in 2020 he had to send everybody home, and I had to figure out how to bring everybody back. Neither one of them was easy. We stepped up our communications with the firm and started recording a weekly managing partner video. Steve started that to keep people together and informed, even though we were remote. I picked it up and, after we were back in the office, we moved it to monthly. There was a feeling of normalcy.

We have some challenges remaining from the pandemic and the hybrid work schedule and making sure that people are engaged, but we're doing really well in that regard and thriving.

### **What has been your biggest challenge as managing partner?**

I'd have to say the pandemic. I took over in a fully remote world. It was 31 years into my tenure at the firm, so I knew a lot of people already, but we grew a lot during the pandemic. We hired a lot of people in those years since we were in the middle of a strategic plan that called for growth — we still are. We kept our pedal to the metal in that regard.

It was a challenging time to take over, but talk about everyone having each other's backs. The firm really did come together in a pretty impressive way to support what we were trying to do.

Then, it was bringing people back to the office. There was a lot of uncertainty — concern for peoples' health, uncertainty about how hybrid was going to work, how to keep people engaged. It's been five years since we sent them home, three since we brought them back. I think we've come out stronger for it. I think a lot of the work that we did during the pandemic to invest in people is paying dividends.

### **What's been a highlight over the past four years?**

It's all a highlight. I'm a little cheerleader-y about this. Unlike some managing partners at smaller firms, I don't practice anymore. With 11 offices in nine states, and growing every day, this really is a full-time job.

I tried for about six months to do both and didn't feel like I was doing either very well. Fortunately, I had some junior partners, a few of them who were working with me, who were able to take over, step into some key client relationships.

As a litigator, you see a lot of confrontation, a lot of competition, a lot of trying to win and seeing somebody else lose. Now my whole job is helping people succeed. It is just an incredibly positive job in that everything I'm doing is about trying to help people along their career path, help them with business development, help them find their passion and for many of them, help them find leadership roles at the firm.

The highlight has been taking the focus off of me and my practice and focusing on everybody else. It's just been extremely rewarding. We've got an amazing group of business professionals and lawyers who really want the firm to succeed and want to help each other, and I'm just lucky enough to help lead it.

### **You said you wouldn't necessarily suggest attorneys make it a goal to be a managing partner. Do you have advice for people who are thinking about the possibility of serving in a leadership role?**

My best advice has always been to raise your hand for things you're not sure you can do and use it as a way to get to know the firm better. I think I ended up in this role because I gradually did that and, at

some point, just came to know the firm so well that this was a logical next step for me, or people viewed me as somebody who could serve in this position.

I think having something to do beyond your client work, which still comes first and is the most important thing that we do, makes it a more rewarding and enriching experience. If you do that, you'll find the things that you're passionate about and that could lead to leadership roles.

I tell people to lean in and do the things that might feel uncomfortable. You might surprise yourself. I certainly surprised myself many times.

--Editing by Nicole Bleier.

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