

Lessons From An MP Who Took Over In The Pandemic

By **Aebra Coe**

Law360 (January 12, 2022, 12:24 PM EST) -- Rhonda Tobin took over as managing partner of one of the oldest law firms in the country last March, but she's doing anything but looking back.

In an interview with Law360 Pulse, Tobin outlined her plans for 176-year-old Robinson & Cole LLP, a midsize law firm with offices in eight states, outlining a strategic plan that includes ambitious growth, a prioritization of diversity and inclusion, and plans for flexibility around remote work for both staff and attorneys.

Tobin, who has spent her entire 31-year legal career at Robinson & Cole, said she believes that ways that the law firm adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic will help it operate even better in the future.



Rhonda Tobin

Those include adding new ways of communicating and creating community through intentional strategies for bringing people together and also new ways of working.

"I think the days of five days a week in the office are gone," said Tobin, who is based in Hartford, Conn. "Allowing people the flexibility they've enjoyed for the last 22 months has really changed law firms in a great way. People have grabbed some of their personal lives back, and we don't want to go all the way back to where we were."

Law360 Pulse spoke with Tobin on her goals and what values she looks to when thinking about where to take her firm next. This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

As you approach one year as managing partner of Robinson & Cole, what are some of the biggest challenges you've encountered over the last year?

It's an interesting time to take over a law firm, that's for sure. I often say it will be fun to do this job when we're not in a pandemic because I only know it during the pandemic. I guess the biggest challenge for me was my lack of ability to travel to different offices and interact with all of our people, both our existing people and a large number of new hires.

It's important that I communicate with people, that we had a seamless transition in leadership, and that we're continuing to execute on our strategic plan. But people want to get my take on that and what my

plans are. So we've been doing that in different ways in terms of finding alternate ways to communicate when, for much of the time, I haven't physically been able to be face to face with people.

I think the challenges are what all law firms have faced, which is to make sure that we're delivering our client service, which we always do. For us, really, to continue the growth mode that we're in and to make sure we're integrating our lateral attorneys even though they're joining us remotely. In 2021, we hired 85 people — 35 lawyers and 50 staff.

What was the impetus behind hiring 50 staff members?

A number of things. One coming out of our strategic plan was a real commitment to talent management. A couple of weeks before COVID hit we hired our first chief talent officer and really empowered her to build up a talent management team. So a number of hires in that area dedicated to the recruitment and retention and promotion of our talent. We beefed up our staffing in a couple of attorney career development managers to make sure associates' careers are developing the way they want them to. We added a senior recruiting manager with a lot of experience at larger law firms recruiting at all levels, both partners and associates.

Also, in the business development and marketing area, a lot of growth there to make sure we're supporting our practice groups. Since we are in growth mode, it's important that those groups have the support they need. And a lot of other areas as well. There's additional needs in IT, really making sure we're at the cutting-edge of technology. We've really invested in some of our IT functions including making sure that all of our systems are secure.

Some of it is just making sure we have the administrative support needed in certain offices, and some of it is more specialized.

You mentioned the firm's strategic plan. What are the broad strokes of that, and what are your goals for the law firm over the next five years?

Talent management is one piece of our strategic plan, making sure we're investing in recruiting, retaining and promoting the best talent that we can. That part of the plan has a very strong emphasis on diversity, equity and inclusion, which is very important to me, and it's been important to the firm for as long as I've been here. So, making sure the chief talent officer and talent management team is very focused on our D&I initiatives, making sure we're providing support to all of our lawyers and providing leadership opportunities for all of our lawyers.

Growth as well. Our growth plan is to double down on our strong practices and grow in our large commercial centers. During the pandemic we've had growth in every practice and in every office. We're not trying to be a national law firm, and we're not growing for the sake of growing. But where we have strategic opportunities to double down on our strengths, if it takes us to new geographies, we're really open to that and excited about that.

The other parts of our strategic plan speak to particular practice areas and making sure there's depth in our practices to meet client needs. Making sure we're investing in succession planning so that as people get close to retirement there's a plan many years out, not waiting until the last year.

I think that plan and the tweaks we make to it going forward will really inform what we do over the next five years.

How has your law firm navigated the pandemic, remote working, and how has your law firm adapted as a result?

I am incredibly proud of how well we adapted. It is really remarkable how our people stepped up and gave 110% every day to make sure we didn't skip a beat. Pre-pandemic we'd invested in technology, and that allowed for a pretty seamless transition.

I also have to credit our senior management team who have really been incredible in managing the remote workplace and protocols for people coming into our office and mandating vaccines and dealing with all of the HR issues that arise from all of that. I think we've really prioritized the health and well-being of our people throughout, and we continue to do that as we keep trying to bring people back to the office and the variants keep setting us back.

As I said, we've had to integrate 85 people in 2021 alone and more in 2020. Some of the new initiatives we've implemented, a lot of it is around bringing people together and communicating with people. We've increased the number of town halls we have, the number of meetings we have with breakout groups to make sure we're hearing from people about what their concerns are. Our practice group leaders have really stepped up. If they used to meet monthly, now they're meeting weekly or biweekly to make sure they're connecting with people in their group. We've had a lot of fun events. It might be a remote 5K to trivia nights to all kinds of social things.

Our core values are civility, collaboration and inclusion, and I think we've really kept them top of mind for the last 22 months to make sure that nothing we're doing is interfering with our values and, if anything, bending over backwards to make sure we're engaged in activities that further those values.

Do you have plans for allowing remote work for people, a hybrid workplace, in the future post-pandemic?

We do. We canvassed our people and had some town halls over the summer with our staff and lawyers. The plan is when we do go back to go back on a two- to three-day work week. So people would be in the office two to three days a week and work remotely the other days.

What are some ways you work to make sure the next generation of women lawyers and lawyers of color have opportunities to advance to leadership positions?

That's pretty essential to our strategic plan. For us, it really starts with our hiring efforts and making sure we're recruiting diverse lawyers as summer associates and first years. We're engaged in several pipeline programs with law schools where we partner with clients to bring in diverse lawyers to our summer associate program.

Then we focus on talent management, including professional development programs and attorney career managers and our mentoring programs, just to ensure that people can be successful at the firm.

And then I'd say we've been really intentional about providing opportunities for attorneys to assume leadership roles. We're really proud of our Mansfield Rule certification. We achieved our Mansfield Rule 4.0 certification and we're now in our 5.0 program year, which has really made a difference for us in terms of adding diverse lawyers to leadership positions. It's really changed our metrics in pretty significant ways.

It requires being intentional about it. It doesn't happen by accident, and it doesn't happen just because you've grown the number of diverse lawyers at your firm. You've really got to make sure once you've recruited those people you're giving them those opportunities.

--Editing by Alyssa Miller.

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