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## Women-owned SSM Law builds virtual boutique around flexibility and fractional GC work

Founded after its namesake saw slim odds for equity advancement at a large firm, SSM Law PC has grown into a 15-attorney virtual boutique advising venture capital and technology clients nationwide while emphasizing adaptable workloads and shared equity.

By Shane Nelson

Special to the Daily Journal

When attorney Lindsey S. Mignano decided to launch a law firm with two friends in spring 2016, she was operating with some compelling data.

"I'm a woman of color, and chances of making equity partner in a real way in a larger law firm - one over 1,000 people - the statistics weren't looking super favorable for me," Mignano said. "It was something like 2.5% if you were an Asian American female at a firm over 1,000 people, which at the time I was."

A fourth-generation entrepreneur, Mignano grew up on the island of Oahu in Hawaii, where she said her great grandfather - an Okinawan immigrant - built and ran the largest poultry farm in the state for more than 60 years.

"So, I was already primed, in a way, to be a small business owner," Mignano said. "And I was already used to seeing my family in positions of power and calling shots and making decisions. It was already instilled in me that if I really wanted to have that for my own professional life, the only way to really do that is equity - meaningful equity in a firm. So, we opened our own."

Headquartered in San Francisco, SSM Law PC is home to 15 attorneys, and operates on a completely virtual model, allowing lawyers and staff to



Lindsey Mignano, Kelly Lawton-Abbott and Teela Smith | Thomas Kurtz/Special to the Daily Journal

work remotely. The firm's two other equity partners, Teela Crosthwaite Smith and Kelly Lawton-Abbott, are based in San Diego and Seattle, respectively.

Regularly representing venture capital funds, technology companies and industry-adjacent service providers across the country, SSM Law PC provides a wide range of fractional general counsel services for clients, including everything from contractual, M & A and tax guidance to help with early-stage financing,

intellectual property and privacy.

"There are clients that we have with unlimited budgets and some who really don't want any over lawyering and others who want to cross every T and dot every I. And we can adapt to all their needs," said Smith, who helped launch the firm and was a classmate of Mignano's at UC Hastings College of the Law.

"What I love about our firm and my practice specifically is getting to know the businesses of our clients and helping them make decisions

based on their business," Smith explained. "It's still legal but understanding the why on a deep level makes things interesting and makes us ultimately more effective in the service we provide."

Lawton-Abbott, who joined the firm as an associate in 2022 and was promoted to equity partner in 2023, focuses primarily on tech companies, working with startups all the way up to large global corporations.

"While we are solving legal problems, the legal problems are, 'How

does the business grow? How does the business evolve?” Lawton-Abbott said. “And I look at it as being able to solve legal problems with business solutions in mind.”

Smith added that the women-owned firm takes work-life balance seriously, but she and her partners want each of the shop’s attorneys and staff members to be able to decide what that equilibrium looks like for themselves.

“We respect and accommodate people in whatever phase of life they’re in,” Smith explained. “I have two small children, for example, and that would be a difficult thing to maintain in a firm that required me to bill 22,000 plus hours a year.

... Having a firm that accommodates everybody - and that goes for the men who are part of our firm as well - has been really special.”

Mignano said the firm was also launched with an equity-sharing plan designed to fairly address those work-life balance decisions.

“In some law firms, if you step out to have children or maybe just take some time off, they’ll make you give up your equity, which is your voice in the firm, because you’re not really working as much as the rest of the partners,” Mignano explained. “We went out of our way to devise a very complex profit-sharing plan so that no one - if they step out in any way, if they downgrade

their hours because they want to be with their kids during formative years or not - no one loses their voice at the firm.”

James T. Huie, a partner at Paul Hastings LLP in San Francisco, has known Mignano for several years and frequently refers tech company clients to her. Huie said he’s only ever heard good things about SSM LLP and described the boutique as a “trusted resource for the startup world.”

“Lindsey is a glue that really connects early-stage founders and investors and legal,” Huie said. “When people chat with Lindsey, they really walk away with something that is valuable or helpful that they didn’t

have coming into the conversation. And that conversation might be anywhere from 5 minutes to 60 minutes. But I think that just shows the breadth and the connectivity she has.”

Mignano expects the boutique’s growth to accelerate some in its 10th year of business, but she doesn’t see the philosophy of allowing its lawyers to dictate the size of their contribution changing any time soon.

“There are staff who never want to be a partner here, and that doesn’t change my estimation of them as people,” she explained. “This is a firm where as long as you do good work, you’re welcome.”

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