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LAW FIRM BUSINESS

Talent Without Boundaries

Kirsten Schlenger found her calling in immigration law. She hooked up with Laura Mazel and Mary Jane Weaver to form a boutique targeting technology startups that's become a go-to law firm in the market.

By Joshua Sebold
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SAN FRANCISCO — Kirsten Schlenger started her legal career by following the same path as her father: becoming a tax attorney on Wall Street. But after five years, she decided that the Street's money-driven culture and the personalities that system lent itself to weren't for her.

So she moved to San Francisco in the late 1980s and even considered leaving the legal profession entirely for the nonprofit sector. That's when she found her calling.

"Once I got into immigration and met the people, there was just no going back," she said. "It was really a community who embraced each other and shared, and you could just save lives."

Schlenger eventually met Mary Jane Weaver, at the time an associate at a firm now known as Berry Appleman & Leiden LLP, and the pair discovered they had observed the same trend — that the rapidly expanding startup technology sector in the Bay Area was creating hundreds of companies having a hard time finding affordable immigration counsel.

"I said, 'Gosh, I think there's a real niche there for these clients who have [venture capital] funding. They've got these great ideas, they're going somewhere,'" Weaver said.

"They just couldn't get counsel," Schlenger said.

That was in 1996. Today, San Francisco-based Weaver Schlenger Mazel LLP, now home to three partners, has carved out a position as a premier business immigration boutique for startup technology companies. Its tagline? "Talent Without Boundaries."

Its clients, many of which have ballooned from under 100 employees to over 1,000, include a variety of tech companies and research institutions such as Wikimedia Foundation, UC Davis, and UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital, in addition to financial services and advertising companies.

Schlenger and Weaver added the



By Joshua Sebold / Daily Journal
From left, Kirsten Schlenger, Laura Mazel and Mary Jane Weaver of Weaver Schlenger Mazel LLP.

firm's third partner, Laura Mazel, in 2004. Mazel started her career at Stoel Rives LLP in Portland, but moved to San Francisco when her husband took a job here.

The three make strategic decisions as a group and share leadership responsibilities, but Schlenger serves as managing partner, due in part to her affinity for numbers and knowledge of tax law.

"I like to consider myself the office busy body. I just know everything that's going on," she said.

The trio overlap on about 70 percent of their workload, with some specialization on the remaining 30.

"Laura does research institutions and that has a little bit of a different twist to it. I can do certain types of university petitions, and Mary Jane does a lot of the core corporate work," Schlenger said.

Over the years, the firm has grown to 18 employees, including six attorneys. It took in more than \$2 million in revenue last year. The partners say they have room to grow their staff to 25, but that might be the ceiling.

"Then you need to do more managing than lawyering. We like to lawyer," Schlenger said. "I could see us allying with like-sized firms nationally."

Clients say the firm has had no prob-

lem handling their growth, even when companies have expanded 10 times beyond their original size.

Mike Guerchon, chief human resources officer at Riverbed Technology, said his company has gone from taking in \$22 million per year to more than \$1 billion in the nine years he's been there. WSM Immigration has handled roughly 90 percent of its immigration work.

"We've had hundreds and hundreds of immigration petitions and issues over the years and we've never once had a negative result," he said. "We probably have 200-plus people today in the country who are here on differing levels of visa sponsorship."

Being able to name-drop the firm actually gives him an advantage when talking to potential hires, he said. "To know they will be represented by this firm is a huge competitive advantage compared to some little mom and pop company or someone who tries to do this in-house."

Guerchon said the firm's rates are roughly 10 percent to 20 percent higher than other options he's explored, but the level of service is worth it. The partners currently charge \$385 per hour, though the firm does more than 90 percent of its business on a flat-fee basis.

The firm prides itself on developing

long-term relationships with clients, Mazel said. "The way we lose a client is when they're acquired by Oracle," she said.

But even then, "usually our HR contacts don't stay at those companies," Schlenger added. "They move to a different company and bring us in."

Michael Zukerman, chief legal officer and interim chief operations officer at CSAA Insurance Group, an AAA insurer, met Weaver more than 20 years ago. He says the firm has kept his business as he's moved from company to company because of its exceptional responsiveness and affinity for working directly with an employee, which makes his job easier and puts his workers more at ease when dealing with a difficult and frightening business immigration process.

"I've been general counsel at five or six companies and I've taken her with me from an immigration help perspective to at least four or five of those," he said.

WSM attorneys are well known in their field. Schlenger served on the board of the American Immigration Lawyers Association for 12 years, including as chairwoman from 2008 to 2010. She also chaired the Board of Trustees of the American Immigration Council from 2010 to 2012.

Tammy Fox-Isicoff, a partner at Miami-based Rifkin & Fox-Isicoff PA, said WSM is an old-school firm in a practice area where partners often pass the majority of their work on to paralegals, and the difference in quality and responsiveness is notable.

"The lawyers in the Schlenger firm still do the work. It's really the exception to the rule," she said. "They're not merely rainmakers, they're the worker bees, and that's what really distinguishes the quality of the work from the Wal-Mart firms."

Weaver partners say they've turned down many offers to merge, but that they plan to continue growing with client needs and are interested in pursuing alliances with similar firms in other regions.