

Competitive Drive

Former Paul Hastings LLP attorneys, the partners of Grube Brown & Geidt LLP say they want to compete with the big firms, and do so with a client list that includes Chevron and Sutter Health.

By Joshua Sebold
Daily Journal Staff Writer

The attorneys at San Francisco employment defense boutique Grube Brown & Geidt LLP don't want to be in big law firms anymore, but they do want to compete with them.

The partners all worked together at Paul Hastings LLP and kept a hefty roster of big name clients when they left, such as International Business Machines Corp., Chevron Corp. and Sutter Health.

The firm's seven attorneys handle a wide variety of work, including counseling on litigation prevention measures, trial work, class actions, appeals and obscure areas of labor and employment law.

Jeff Grube left his post as vice chair of Paul Hastings' Palo Alto office last year. Fellow name partners Lisa Brown and Tom Geidt joined him to form the firm in April 2014.

They added appellate specialist Kathy Huibonhoa in February.

Geidt is the old hand of the group. He started his career prosecuting unfair labor practice cases at the National Labor Relations Board for seven years before switching to representing employers. He's represented hundreds of employers and authored briefs to the U.S. Supreme Court and the state Supreme Court.

Brown said changes in the market for employment attorneys made it tantalizing to move to a smaller firm with more flexible pricing. The partners' mix of employment law specializations and relationships with clients gave them the confidence to form their own shop.

"The goal was to provide the same caliber and same type of work we did at Paul Hastings but on a more flexible platform for our clients," she said.

That seems to have been a good bet. Clients voice confidence in the boutique's attorneys and their ability to



Sam Attal / Special to the Daily Journal

Left to right: Jeff Grube, Lisa Brown, Tom Geidt and Kathy Huibonhoa, partners at Grube Brown & Geidt LLP.

compete with larger opponents.

Ernest Aliseda, general counsel and chief legal officer at Loya Insurance Group, said the company transferred a sizable chunk of its litigation work to Brown after she got a favorable settlement in a complex litigation that she joined late in the process.

Though she gained the CEO's trust by proving her litigation chops, the company has expanded her role to something closer to an outside GC for employment matters.

"She is actually looking through our employee manuals, mainly in California, but she's also coordinating with other law firms outside of California for us," Aliseda said. "We trust her to coordinate and do the kind of stuff I would have to do if she wasn't around."

Grube has also turned heads with his litigation record. He's undefeated as a first chair in trials and arbitrations and has won eight jury trials in a row on cases that reached a verdict.

Grube said the concept of breaking the winning streak has become a running joke at the firm, as well as a motivator.

"The last couple trials I talked to my team beforehand and said, 'Maybe this is the one,'" he said. "Then I think a

second and tell my team, 'Maybe not this one.'"

Brent G. Houk, a labor and employment attorney at United Parcel Service Inc., said Grube has handled the company's wage an hour litigation, along with some other matters, for nearly a decade.

He said Grube can usually resolve claims without litigation, but he's also won multiple cases for UPS at trial, giving the company the confidence that he can handle whatever developments arise in a case.

Houk said the firm's knowledge of his business and ability to see new issues coming is invaluable.

"When cases interpreting law come out, they're first off the mark to get that information to us, how it might affect us, whether there are things we need to consider changing to take proactive steps to avoid trouble," he said.

Lower rates than their larger competitors also help.

"In comparing them to the really big full service law firms, they have attractive rates," he said. "When you compare to some of the more boutique shops, their rates are competitive."

The firm isn't interested in expanding rapidly but Brown plans to open a

small Los Angeles office, as she lives in the area and does much of her work in Southern California courts.

The partners are dedicated to giving associates more experience than they would typically get at a large firm, which seems to stem from some of the unusual opportunities the partners got at Paul Hastings.

Grube spent almost half of his first two years with the firm editing the third edition of the ABA's book on employment discrimination law.

"It was a great way to learn the substantive law as a junior associate, working with the best and most preeminent employment lawyers across the country," he said. "Editing their work was humbling and something I really appreciated."

Shane C. Stafford, a partner at Shanberg, Stafford & Bartz LLP who has settled a few cases across the table from Brown, said his opponent was also given significant responsibilities early in her career.

"I don't think we worked with the partner on the case at all," he said. "Lisa was basically running the case which says a lot about an associate at a big firm."

Yewleh Chee, an associate at the boutique, said the partners strive to give her the same type of experience they had.

"My third week here, Lisa said 'Hey, I have a court appearance tomorrow. Do you want to come?'" she said. "I got to observe her in action and I think there are a lot of opportunities to get involved."

She said the firm gives her the best of both worlds when it comes to the level of work the firm performs and the ability to get involved early on in a career.

"Our partners came from big law, so they have great clients and the opportunity to do very sophisticated legal work," she said. "But it's a small firm where you get really hands on and have a lot of responsibility."

joshua_sebold@dailyjournal.com