

Law Firm Leaders: Jones Walker's Bill Hines

By **Sam Reisman**

Law360 (May 8, 2019, 11:24 AM EDT) -- The first thing Bill Hines wants people to know about Jones Walker LLP, the 355-attorney firm that he has managed for 14 years, is that it's different.

With a wide southern footprint that stretches from Florida to Arizona, as well as New York and Washington, D.C., offices, the firm has grown dramatically beyond its Louisiana roots since its 1937 founding. However, Hines doesn't like to emphasize the firm's size, but its character and ambition and, more specifically, how it has succeeded for decades in bringing high-end work and luring top-tier national talent to its home market.

"I do view ourselves as a different animal than ... a typical law firm headquartered in New Orleans, or something that's got sort of a local practice," he said. "Our client base and our practice is very, very diverse and very international."

Hines spoke to Law360 recently about what it takes to become a managing partner and the changing climate for midsize law firms. This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

How did you come to be the firm's managing partner?

When is the right time to move from part-time managing and part-time legal practice to full-time managing? I think that's one of the toughest things for firms in that 180- to 250-lawyer range. It's not just ego. [In] 2005, the firm had agreed to transition to a full-time managing partner model, where I gave up my legal practice. The last time I billed an hour was 2007, so it took me a couple years to wean myself away. And I now full-time manage. That means we put less pressure on other lawyers to manage, so it's more on me, with a very robust senior staff that are nonlawyers.

In the old days, we had a management committee, which a lot of midsize firms have, that had four or five lawyers that all part-time manage, and I can jokingly say that meant no one managed. It meant you got reports and you had a meeting once a month for a couple hours, and then you went back and practiced law. I think that's fine for a 20-lawyer firm, but that doesn't work for a firm that wants to have a strategic plan and really grow in this environment.



Bill Hines
Jones Walker
managing partner

Do you think the business of law has changed in recent years to the point that firms need full-time managers who don't also practice, or is that something that's always been true?

I think it's always been true. But I think it's become much more important now from a client demand standpoint. The whole nature of the practice of law has changed dramatically in the last 15 to 20 years. Our staff was fine 20 years ago, it was fine for the time. But now you need a chief information officer, and a CFO and controller and a chief marketing officer, and all the staff under them to really help meet all these client needs.

Lawyers, not in their politics but in their worldview, are very often conservative. A lot of lawyers don't like change. I wasn't even so sure we needed this managing partner role in '05. The truth is we probably could have used it in 2000. There was this theory also that if you're taking me, [you're] going to use to lose [my] productivity. I'm not billing hours. I'm going to cost the firm something to manage the firm.

The answer is, if I'm doing a good job, hopefully I'm helping produce more revenue. We're cutting costs, we're going to other lines of business, other client relationships, becoming more of an international firm. If the managing partner is reading magazines all day, that's frankly not the right managing partner. But if the managing partner is someone that's applying their skill set to managing the law firm as if I was doing M&A transactions, then hopefully that's going to provide significant value.

So I would argue a good managing partner, and more important, a good management team and management structure will create more revenue to the firm, rather than what's been lost by that managing partner not billing.

What have been your biggest priorities as managing partner?

I think we don't have to make any more structural changes. It took us probably five or 10 years for me to get the right firm structure in place. The firm has generally done very well so you don't want to blow up the firm to start changing things completely, just because a consultant told you to do it. Now, the fun of the job, the challenge of the job, is to, at a minimum, stay up with current trends and current best practices, [and] even try to stay slightly ahead of them.

I go to these international legal seminars and hear the latest developments in law and come back and apply them to Jones Walker. I can tell you that when I look at a partners meeting, I would say anyone in their lower 50s and under generally has a smile on their face and embraces what I tell them. They like to hear that we're going to do something new and innovative. And anyone who's in their mid-50s, and in particular when you get them in their 60s, they stare at me and there's a little bit of, "I hate this change."

I try to tell some of them in one-on-one conversations: "The world is changing, the economy is changing, our clients are changing, technology is changing. I fully get that you don't like it but if we don't change and keep up with it, this firm is going to fall behind." I've seen good firms over a 10-year period actually collapse if they don't stay in the game.

Is the billable hour dead?

My father was a lawyer who died in 2001. He and I used to have this discussion. He hated the billable hour, but when he started practicing, which was in '55-'56, from then until the late '70s, he hardly ever billed by the billable hour. It was what we call now alternative fee arrangements. You worked on a trial

or you worked on a case, you [spoke] with the client as to what the value was and then you agreed to a fee, and they paid it. He said it was insurance companies that wanted to be able to audit and monitor legal fee charges, that brought [the billable hour] in in the late '70s. That is the bane of many lawyers' existence.

To your question, I think it's declining now. I think what you're now seeing is a mix of billable hours and these alternative fee arrangements. Right now we're kind of in purgatory. It's a tough period for lawyers. I think we're moving more and more back to the way it was 40 years ago, with value-based billing and project management. But most clients, and I can tell you, almost all insurance companies want billable hours still, even with the alternative fee, to be able to audit the amount of time lawyers are spending and the seniority level of the lawyers and their rates.

Tell me about firm's growth strategy. How much has changed since you became managing partner?

We've a little less than doubled. We've probably grown by 75 to 80%. We've generally done it by acquiring other law firms. When I started this, we were primarily a Louisiana law firm, period, full stop, with a D.C. office. So during this period, we've grown across the South. I personally believe it's always better to hire lawyers either in groups — whole practices — or a whole law firm. When you hire one person, you're betting one of two things: either the one person is going to move their whole client base, [or] we have so much work in so many different areas of law that I don't care if they bring any business because I can fill their plate completely. That's actually a great problem to have.

When you acquire a whole law firm that's got 55 lawyers, you probably find out over a three- to five-year period that maybe 10 to 15 of those lawyers don't really measure up to your standards. Very often, it's mutual. We have what we call a high-performance culture. We want to be able to tell you that [we] can provide the same quality legal service as a major New York law firm. We believe we can. It involves 24-hour accessibility. Lawyers that join us from fine smaller law firms, after two or three years, they realize it's not really what they want to do.

Will you ever go back to the practicing law?

I'll turn 63 in May. I sometimes ask myself: Will I finish out my legal career doing it? What's interesting is, if I was a litigator, I would think being managing partner of a firm would [cause] extraordinary withdrawal. Because you're not having anything to do with trying cases, managing a firm. Remember, I was a corporate and transactional lawyer. So when I'm buying law firms and considering tax issues for the firm and considering new leases and new geographic markets and all that, that's what I did as a lawyer. I'm managing the law firm as a business person, but I'm actually able to apply my corporate transactional legal skills.

I think it would be interesting if we ever have a panel, or a point-counterpoint interview, on how a very successful litigation partner looks at managing a firm versus how I look at managing firm, because it's a totally different lens. I've had to, over the last 12 years, get more of an appreciation of what matters to litigators, because what matters to a litigator is not necessarily what matters to a corporate securities lawyer in terms of hiring and their needs and expenditures and training and how they're compensated.

What advice would you give to a young attorney?

Some say they want to be me; they think it must be fun to be managing partner. Others see the lifestyle; they see I'm out almost every night doing events with clients. And they'll tell me they don't want to

spend that time. So with that background, the main thing I would tell some of the young lawyers, and it's probably the ones who want to be managing partner someday — and it sounds corny, it's probably the last thing they want to hear — but they need to spend their whole associateship and their first several years of being a partner learning to be a good lawyer.

I did have to get nominated and elected to be managing partner. Lawyers are tough graders and they're cynical. "Does Bill really have the practice of law? Do you have the credibility to do it?" I think a lot of young lawyers want to skip through all that and start to manage client relationships. I was a 2,400-billable-hour-a-year lawyer for 15 to 20 years before I moved into this, and working for difficult clients, often at inconvenient times. I would tell the lawyer that's what they need to spend the first part of their career doing. The other thing we emphasize as a firm is civic and philanthropic involvement. But they have to always remember that can't take precedence over their primary role here, which is to provide high-quality and efficient legal services to our clients.

Life balance issues certainly applied to me in the '80s. You can interview my children whether I made the right decisions or not. Who got the short end of the stick? It probably was more my wife and children than it was my job. Other people would choose more their spouse and children and maybe less their job: maybe then they wouldn't be managing partner. I hate to say that, I'm just trying to tell the truth. Some of the sacrifices allowed me to become managing partner, and maybe if I hadn't made those, quite candidly, I would be practicing law here, but I probably wouldn't be managing partner. I don't believe you can have it all in life; I think that's actually impossible.

To me one of the most important traits in any lawyer, at least at a large law firm in this day and age, is the trait of collaboration. It's collaborations with fellow lawyers in the law firm, so listening and working with their fellow lawyers across practice lines, across geographic lines. And the second piece is collaborating with the client. I think in the '60s, '70s and '80s, [law firms and clients were] two different worlds. Right now, I think really successful law firms are partnering with their clients.

--Editing by Katherine Rautenberg.