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Cleary California: How an East Coast firm bet it could import its culture to the Bay Area

For its first new domestic offices since the 1940s, Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton LLP chose to import longtime partners - a decision that has helped it gain a foothold in two markets while maintaining its culture.

By David Houston
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When Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton LLP opened twin offices in San Francisco and Palo Alto in 2021—its first new U.S. offices in more than 80 years—it didn't follow the standard Bay Area blueprint. The elite New York firm didn't hire a local group or merge with a West Coast player.

Instead, it airlifted a team of veteran East Coast partners across the country, betting that it could plant Cleary's famously tight-knit culture into two regions with distinct cultures of their own—an effort they dubbed “Cleary California.”

“We were going to move people who had been at the firm for decades... and then bring in people who had their careers in the Bay Area to complement that,” said Jennifer Kennedy Park, one of the partners who relocated from the East Coast.

Nearly three years later, the bet appears to be paying off.

“We got here with the goal of developing new relationships with clients that are storied in Silicon Valley, some of the most important VCs, some of the most important tech companies. And we've accomplished that in under three years, which I think is a testament to the commitment to the strategy working,” Park said.

Cleary's decision to open two offices simultaneously was unconventional, too. Even more unusual: this was the firm's first U.S. office opening since the 1940s. Park said the decision was driven by long-standing client relationships in the tech and private equity sectors, and the realization that proximity would enhance crisis management, antitrust, and M&A advisory services.

“The question for us was, would being physically here make a difference?” Park explained. “And we decided the answer was yes.”



JENNIFER KENNEDY PARK

The initial Bay Area team was composed of veteran Cleary partners, including Park, who specializes in white collar and crisis management, and George S. Cary and Brian Byrne, both antitrust specialists.

Some recruiters advised they should poach a group of attorneys from another firm, Park recalled. “That's how everybody else is doing it. You should really think about it,” they were told.

“It just didn't seem like the right approach for us at the very beginning. It doesn't mean we're not open to that now that we're here, now that we're more settled, now that we're bigger, now that we could absorb and integrate. But at the very beginning, I think we nailed it.”

Cleary added a few strategic laterals once the office was up and running, starting with Heather

Nyong'o, a well-regarded antitrust lawyer from WilmerHale.

This year, Cleary made its largest lateral move yet, bringing on five patent litigators from Latham & Watkins LLP—three of them, Giri Pathmanaban, Gregory K. Sobolski, and Thomas Yeh, based in the Bay Area. The hires marked the firm's entry into patent litigation.

Park recalled going to a conference with a colleague soon after arriving in the Bay Area and hearing a judge who was on one of the panels ask for a show of hands if their firm has a patent practice. “Every single hand in the crowd went up except us. And we said, ‘Oh, we need a patent practice.’”

Cleary's Bay Area offices are structured to function as a single entity. But Park said one of things she hadn't understood until arriving in the Bay Area was how distinct the San Francisco and Silicon Valley markets are. “It is a different set of clients headquartered in San Francisco versus headquartered down here in the Peninsula.”

There were other culture shocks, too.

“One of the first matters I did when I got out here involved a grand jury subpoena. And I had a client who said, ‘Well, we're just not going to respond to it.’ And I thought, ‘Oh, wow. That's interesting.’ That's not where we ultimately ended up,” Park recalled.

“I think one thing that can be different out here is that there is slightly more willingness to take risks in the interest of achieving a business goal,” Park said.

But three years on, the firm believes Cleary California has been a success. The Bay Area offices have grown from three to 30 attorneys. “In Cleary speak, that's fast,” Park said.

She took special pride in the fact that the Bay Area offices now have six women partners.

“We're going to keep growing. We are committed to the Bay Area,” Park said.