

How We Started Our Own Law Firm: 'When You Start a Firm, You Have to Build That Infrastructure From Scratch'

Starting a law firm meant becoming a small business owner on day one.

By Tasha Norman

Hon. Richard J. Holwell, Michael S. Shuster, Daniel P. Goldberg, Dorit Ungar Black; Holwell Shuster & Goldberg, New York

Job titles: Founding partners.

Practice area: HSG is focused on the representation of clients in high-stakes commercial disputes across the U.S. and beyond. Our practice areas include antitrust, appellate, arbitration/mediation, bankruptcy litigation, distressed debt & fund litigation, intellectual property, securities litigation, transnational litigation, and white-collar & investigations.

What year did you start your firm? 2012.

How long have you been an attorney?

- Rick: More than 50 years
- Mike: 36 years
- Dan: 27 years
- Dorit: 23 years



(l-r) Richard J. Holwell, Michael S. Shuster, Daniel P. Goldberg, and Dorit Ungar Black of Holwell Shuster & Goldberg.

Courtesy Photo

What do you think was the deciding point to start your own firm? **Rick:** Like many things in life, it was a matter of timing for us. The important pieces were in place long before we launched. There was no mystery about who would be involved; we all had longstanding ties to each other in private practice. We

also had the confidence to believe that we could build a better mousetrap. Maybe most importantly, we all wanted to create an institution that survived our own legal careers. At some point, we had to either give up on that desire or act on it—and when that time came, we were all ready.

Where were you (what were you doing) prior to starting your firm? **Dorit:** Before launching HSG in 2012, Mike, Dan, and I were partners at an Am Law 200 firm in New York. Rick was serving as a judge on the Southern District of New York, where he had been on the bench since 2003. Before that, he had practiced with Mike and Dan at White & Case.

What was the biggest surprise you experienced in starting your firm? **Mike:** We had high expectations for our firm, and no shortage of optimism. But we exceeded our fondest dreams in at least two respects. First, in how quickly clients were willing to trust us with major matters across jurisdictions and on both sides of the “v”, and how readily our colleagues at other firms were to trust us with their clients where they had conflicts or otherwise had occasion to refer us work or partner with us in key cases. Second, in how willing associates with sterling credentials and diverse backgrounds were to join us. We kid that we were asking these associates to jump from the yachts they were on to a boat we were still building, but many who were highly accomplished and had superb prospects were willing to do so.

What is the biggest change, day to day in your routine since starting your own firm?

Dan: My daily routine didn’t undergo any dramatic change after we launched—my commute takes just as long as it used to—but I would say that there is a certain weight of responsibility that I carry in my day-to-day work life that I did not before. We care deeply about the success and longevity of our firm, and you can’t ensure that without giving attention to it on a daily basis. If that’s any kind of burden, it is more than offset by the satisfaction we can take in charting our own path.

What challenges or obstacles, if any, did you have to overcome when starting your firm? **Dorit:** Up until 2012, I had been in BigLaw my entire career, and had enjoyed the comforts that come with being in an institutional environment. Aside from the obvious anxiety over leaving a relatively safe position for an uncertain future, I did not know to what extent I had an entrepreneurial bent. Up until that point, I had only ever worn a lawyer’s hat, but never an entrepreneur’s hat. Starting a law firm meant becoming a small business owner on day one.

The biggest challenge was building an infrastructure.

When you work in BigLaw, you are used to an infrastructure that caters to your every need and allows you to focus almost exclusively on practicing law and servicing clients. But when you start a firm, you have to build that infrastructure from scratch; everything from office space, malpractice insurance, LexisNexis and/or Westlaw accounts, Pacer accounts, process servers, health care and 401(k) plans, billing software, IT (including computer hardware and software), copiers and printers, office supplies—and the list goes on and on. I was charged with most, if not all of these tasks. Overwhelming as it was at times, I fondly remember the days when our firm was at its infancy. Many of the lawyers who joined us in those very early days are still at the firm as partners and counsel, and we sometimes reminisce about the issues that arose back then and that required us to roll up our sleeves and get our hands dirty—they sure make for good anecdotes!

Describe how you feel about your career now that you’ve started your own firm?

Dan: I felt great about my career before starting HSG, and I’m sure I would still if I had remained at White & Case. Practicing at a larger

institution like that has its own rewards. For me, however, there was a tremendous appeal to joining forces with my closest colleagues and creating something of our own. Doing so has made the practice of law feel much more adventuresome over our decade of operation, and for me personally, much more fulfilling. I suspect that as I look back at the end of my career, I will feel more pride in it for having started HSG.

What impact would you like to have on the legal industry?

Mike: We wouldn't presume to aspire to a wider impact. We know we've been fortunate to get where we've gotten so far. We've tried to build a firm that is client focused, has a robust commitment to pro bono work and mentorship, is inclusive and diverse, and genuinely collegial. We know there are many others who are doing the same, and we are grateful to be in their company, follow their good example, and contribute what we can to the furthering of a profession that enables us to do what we love and that we all hold dear.

Who has had the greatest influence in your career that helped propel you to where you are today? **Dorit:** Without

doubt, my co-founding partner Dan Goldberg. I have known Dan since I was a young lawyer at White & Case, and have practiced law with him, first as his associate and later as his partner, for 20 years. In these two decades, Dan has been not only a great mentor, but also a good friend. Dan is an incredibly talented litigator with a laser-sharp mind, and I have sharpened my professional skills and developed my litigation instincts under his tutelage. Dan saw my strengths and what I was able to bring to the table early on in my career and gave me opportunities to run sizeable cases on my own when I was still an associate, something that I have no doubt helped in catapulting me into partnership and ultimately allowed me to start our law firm with him, Rick, and Mike. I am grateful to have had Dan as my mentor for all these years, and to this day I turn to him for advice and as a sounding board. We put a lot of emphasis on mentorship at HSG—through launching a formal mentoring program and actively mentoring and training our firm's associates in a manner that positions them to succeed—so our goal

for the next generation of talent who joins us is that they too will find the likes of a Dan.

What's the key to successful business development in your opinion?

Mike: The biggest key to business development is always to do superb work and achieve great results for clients. Nothing beats that. We've also been fortunate to receive many referrals from our colleagues (and even former adversaries) at other firms, and we like to think that's because we've established a reputation for legal scholarship and professional ethics while still pursuing clients' interests aggressively. For associates starting their careers, one important facet of business development is to stay in touch with and nurture their relationships with their former classmates or colleagues, and to develop a network of contacts and mentors. That pays off over the arc of a career.

What advice would you give someone that is considering launching their own firm/business?

Rick: Be realistic with yourself about whether you have the right people, incoming business, and market opportunity to make a go of it. After that, take a deep breath and do it.