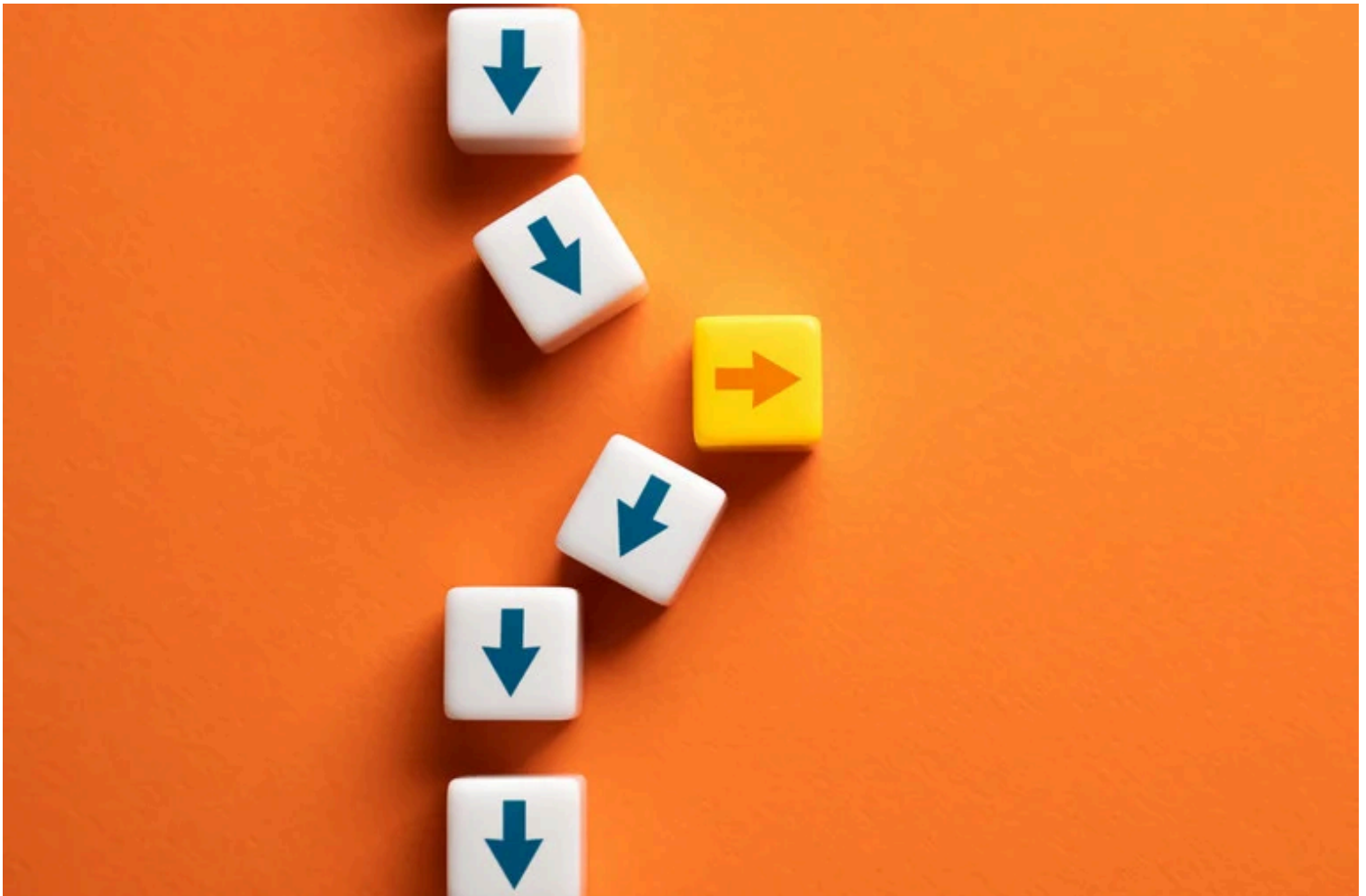


Commentary **Law Firm Marketing and Business Development**

From Kirkland and Sidley to a Fresh Start: Big Law Offshoots Thrive Over the Years

The Kirkland litigators who recently left to launch Hayden Ryan & Ciullo can take comfort in several past examples of lawyers successfully leaving elite firms to build from scratch.

April 10, 2026 at 02:50 PM By  **Vivienne Serret**



Credit: Andrii Yalanskyi/Adobe Stock

In March, a trio of [former Kirkland litigation partners](#) left the firm, betting there was "room for a smaller approach to big litigation." Ex-Kirkland partners Kent Hayden, Brendan Ryan and Zac Ciullo launched Hayden Ryan & Ciullo, embracing a move from the highest earning firm in the world to "a more focused and efficient platform."

In an interview, the partners said they were compelled to set out on their own in response to market increases in billing rates, along with a broader pattern of competition and consolidation among the Am Law 100.

The Hayden Ryan & Ciullo team is just the latest in a long-running pattern of attorneys leaving elite firms and finding new niches and opportunities in the continually expanding U.S. legal marketplace.

Take Roger E. Barton, who left Sidley Austin back in 1991, eventually launching Barton LLP in New York in 2011 following several prior iterations. The firm's motto—"discover better law, not just BigLaw"—remains true and starts with its "elite team of former Big Law partners who didn't leave their brains behind at their old firms," according to Barton.

"Big Law firms, don't get me wrong, they're great places. They have really smart lawyers, they're good at what they do, but it's not always the right fit for every client. It's not always the right fit for every type of service that needs to be provided, and it's not the right fit for a lot of partners who have clients that really are not a good fit for those firms," Barton said. "That's where 'discover better law' came from, and that's where our continued focus is on sourcing our lateral partners from Big Law and then fashioning ourselves as a very efficient microcosm of a larger law firm."

Barton LLP deals a number of sophisticated partnership disputes, with deals ranging from the tens to hundreds of millions, and at times billions.

Last month, the firm won a reversal in a precedent-setting case with the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, defending software company Modernizing Medicine in an employment discrimination dispute. Barton attorneys succeeded in persuading the appeals court that the dispute belonged in binding arbitration thanks to the employment agreement.

"I think there's a lot of competition from the Am Law 25 down to the Am Law 200 for 'who are they and why can they charge the rates that they want to charge, what's their value proposition are they working on work that's price insensitive,' which the top 25 generally are," Barton said. "Those firms are getting bigger, and I think firms that are of our size and maybe a little bit bigger, who have the sophisticated practices like we do, can do very well by picking up work that larger firms are doing—but they're not doing it in a cost effective or user friendly fashion."

Former lawyers from both Sidley and Kirkland were involved in the 2019 launch of Chicago's Croke Fairchild Duarte & Beres, which found itself in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic just months after it opened doors.

Drew Beres arrived from Kirkland, Patrick Croke came from Sidley Austin, Lisa Duarte left own consulting firm and Jessica Fairchild ran her own firm for nearly ten years after a decade at Sidley.

"We kind of came from different directions, but with a common goal of—look, let's go build something different. Let's build it our way, and let's build it with what our thesis was for what a newer, hungrier, younger, more nimble firm [looked] like," Fairchild said.

The firm started as a transactional boutique with very little litigation, according to Fairchild, but the team later bolted on a dedicated litigation group.

"To serve our clients well, we've had to grow ... we've really tried to add on to areas that our clients were hopeful that we could still help them, whether that was IP and banking and real estate or other [areas]," Fairchild said. "But the core of the firm started from transactional [work], now we've expanded from there."

In 2025, the firm's commercial litigation practice and general corporate practice—which encompasses its M&A practice, securities practice and venture capital practice—were the largest just on a headcount and revenue basis.

The Chicago-headquartered firm now has 116 attorneys with a total head count of 152 employees across multiple states, and it is launching a New York office soon.

"Our clients enjoyed the fact that we were hungry, young and building something, because many of them are hungry, young—not all of them—and building something," Beres said. "That's why we grew to be the full service firm we are today, because it was all about this closeness of the client and becoming really intertwined with them, and having them see us as a partner."

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