

Fish & Richardson Atty Talks Path From PhD To Austin Leader

By Lynn LaRowe

Law360 (February 10, 2025, 9:07 AM EST) -- Heather Flanagan started out at Fish & Richardson PC in 2006 as a patent agent utilizing her doctorate degree from Harvard in physical chemistry for the benefit of the technology-focused firm's clients.

Nearly two decades later — after the firm paid for her to attend law school — Flanagan has risen through the ranks to recently become managing partner of the firm's Austin, Texas, office.

Flanagan, whose children were grown when the firm sent her to the University of Texas School of Law in 2012, continued her work as a patent agent while in law school. After graduating and becoming a licensed Texas lawyer, Flanagan transitioned to the role of associate.

Flanagan was elevated to principal at the beginning of 2018 and at the beginning of this year, Flanagan took the office managing partner reins from Jim Babineau, who had led the 20-year-old shop for 16 years and who is a firm-grown lawyer-leader like Flanagan. Flanagan is also the managing group leader of the intellectual property group.

Law360 Pulse recently sat down with Flanagan to talk about the Austin office, the firm's model of sending Ph.D. holders to law school and her advice to others considering a career at the intersection of law and technology. The responses have been edited for length and clarity.

Can you tell me more about the firm's practice of sending professional staff to law school?

It's sort of a rite of passage here. A lot of our leadership came into the firm on the IP side as technology specialists. The firm currently has over 115 lawyers and professional staff who hold a Ph.D.

At the beginning of 2025, Fish had over 20 technology specialists in law school. Three of those (Juan Perez, Dariela Almeda Ph.D., and Ken Langley Ph.D.) are in the Austin office, attending the University of Texas School of Law.

The Austin office also has a new associate, Erin Knight Ph.D., who was a technology specialist here and graduated from [the University of Texas School of Law] in 2024. Last year, the IP group implemented a new program that matches every technology specialist in law school with a law school sponsor. The law school sponsors are principals who work with the technology specialists. The technology specialists in



Heather Flanagan

law school meet monthly with their sponsors to discuss how to navigate challenges that relate to attending law school while maintaining their docket and continuing to develop skills as a patent practitioner.

Many of our group leaders in the IP group also attended law school while at Fish, so they are an additional resource for their group members who are going through the same experience.

Can you talk about the work being done in Austin and the office culture?

There is so much here in Austin technology-wise. Everything from life sciences to mechanical, electrical, software, we cover all of those technologies. There are a lot of industries, education and research.

We have members of both the litigation group and the intellectual property group here. The intellectual property group focuses on patents, copyrights, trademarks, regulatory issues, post-grant licensing.

We have over 50 people — technology specialists, patent agents and over 25 attorneys — in the office. Our former office managing principal, Jim Babineau, has gone to great lengths over the past 16 years to create an environment where everyone feels like a valuable part of a team, working toward common goals.

Our appreciation for and understanding of each other as individuals encourages sharing of knowledge, which leads to more comprehensive insights for clients. I attribute part of this to the level of engagement at our office. The collegial, collaborative environment allows us to assemble teams with the technical and legal skills tailored to each client's needs. At the same time, this culture is also personally rewarding, as we genuinely enjoy helping each other and working together.

Growth in the Austin office has historically been very organic. We welcome talented individuals who are a good fit for our office culture and who can grow and thrive here. This includes attorneys at all levels, as well as technology specialists and patent agents.

Can you talk a little about the pro bono work the Austin-based lawyers do?

One of our principals here, David Hoffman, is on the board of directors for Volunteer Legal Services for Central Texas and that is a big focus for our office.

We have an attorney who has focused his pro bono work on family law and there's another who is focused on probate law. We also have people who enjoy helping with pro bono service in areas like consumer credit or landlord-tenant.

It's interesting and different from our day-to-day work, and it really gives you perspective.

What advice would you give to someone considering a career path like yours?

Part of my work as the managing leader of the intellectual property group is talking to our junior people and helping them figure out how to navigate their careers to reach their goals. I really enjoy that aspect of my work.

I would say that you have to enjoy the technology, you have to enjoy learning about new ideas and

talking with people.

And besides the technical and legal aspects of this work is writing. Writing is a really important part of what we do. It takes practice.

But first, you have to love what you do.

--Editing by Alex Hubbard.

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