

**SPECIAL REPORT LAW FIRMS**

# Creating their dream jobs

Former partners leave the law firm grind behind to do what they love and work fewer hours

By CYNTHIA HANSON

What's a woman lawyer to do if she becomes tired of the law firm grind or fed up with the male-dominated hierarchy? For some, the answer is to move to a less-rigid job in government or the corporate world. But others carve out a different path suited to their interests. Meet three lawyers—all former partners at prominent Chicago firms—who are succeeding on their own terms.

**Deborah G. Cole**

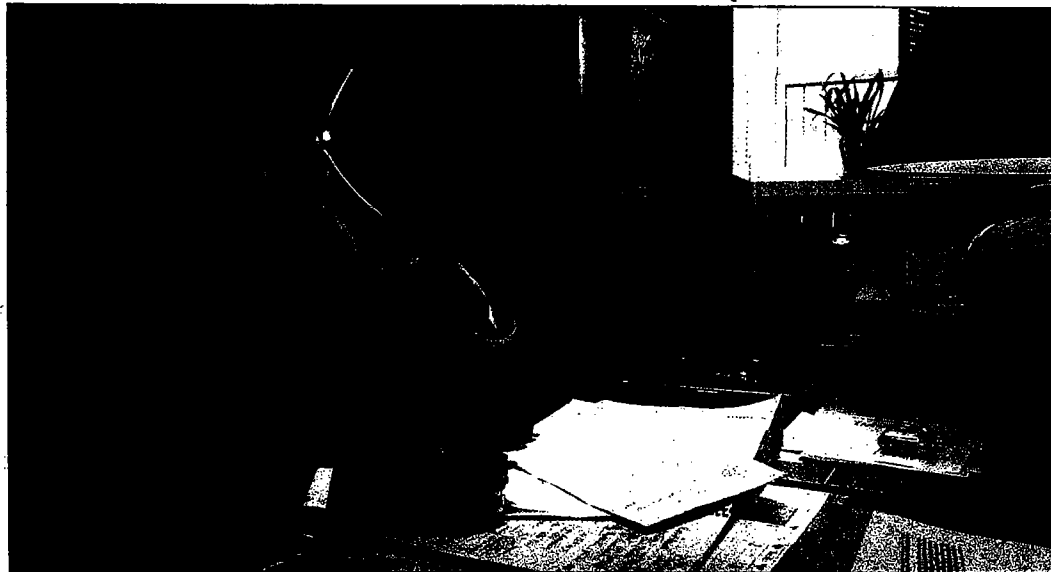
**Firm:** D. G. Cole Law handles commercial, employment and environmental litigation, and provides support for large law firms.

**Best advice:** "Establish a strong client base that you can take with you. And develop good relationships with other lawyers in the community, because they will refer work to you."

Ms. Cole, 50, plays by her own rules. She works out of an office in her Gold Coast condo, dresses in business-casual clothing and brews coffee for clients.

"Sometimes, I've been in my robe when clients have arrived at 8 a.m.," she says, chuckling. "They don't care—and neither do I."

In 2002, after spending 19 years at large and mid-sized law firms in Chicago, Ms. Cole had had enough of the 60-hour work weeks, the pressure to generate business and the billing structure that made her too expensive to represent her own clients. Then an equity partner at the former D'Ancona & Pflaum LLC (which merged with Seyfarth Shaw LLP last year), Ms. Cole was obligated to generate upwards of \$500,000 in new business every year and expected to bill 1,750 hours a year at \$375 per hour. Which meant that Ms. Cole couldn't accept all the cases that interested her—only those that were interesting and economically feasible.



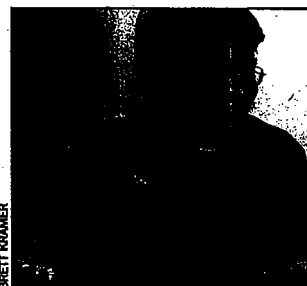
DEBORAH G. COLE "My only regret is that I didn't do this sooner."



**JANE D'ANCONA PIGNOTTI**

"I had been as effective as I could be promoting women within the system, and it seemed like the right time to (go) outside."

JOHN R. BOEHM



**EDITH F. CANTER**

"I no longer enjoyed worrying about whether opposing counsel, a witness or a client wasn't telling me the whole truth..."

BRETT KRAMER

"Equity partners are put in a position where they themselves don't have much hands-on work with the clients they bring to the law firm, unless those clients have no reservations about spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on litigation," explains Ms. Cole, citing skyrocketing overhead and associates' salaries for the financial crunch. "Equity partners have to leverage the work among the associates, whose hourly rates are lower. It got to the point where some of my own clients couldn't afford me anymore—and that made me nuts."

So, Ms. Cole resigned in April 2002. And she took all 25 of her

clients with her, according to D'Ancona & Pflaum.

Today, she usually handles cases alone, hiring other lawyers to help on large matters. She also works as a subcontractor to major law firms that hire her when cases—typically in commercial litigation and employment law—aren't lucrative enough to warrant a partner's full-time involvement. "I do all the work on the case, but the partner at the big firm oversees my work and keeps the client's overall business," Ms. Cole explains. "The partner doesn't have to worry that I'll steal away the client, because as a solo practitioner,

I couldn't physically handle all the client's business—just pieces as they arise."

By operating out of her home, Ms. Cole is reaping substantial savings on overhead, which has allowed her to slash her hourly rate to \$295. And since she collects 100% of her billings, she now earns more money than she did at D'Ancona, yet works fewer hours.

"Now that I'm on my own, I have considerably increased interaction with my clients, which I enjoy very much," she says. "If I bring in associates, it's with (clients') knowledge and

See DREAM JOBS on Page SR4

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Lawyers specialize in helping women

Compelling work makes up for low pay in

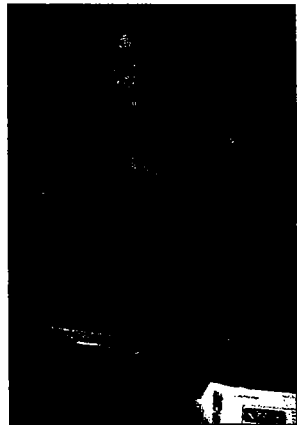
# Women build businesses that center on their interests

**DREAM JOBS** from Page SR1 permission."

In legal circles, Ms. Cole is respected for her tenacity and creative problem-solving. "Deborah Cole thinks outside the box," says Graham Grady, a partner with Mayer Brown Rowe & Maw LLP, citing Ms. Cole's pro bono involvement in a land-use dispute in her neighborhood. A developer wanted to build a mid-rise on North LaSalle Street, and Ms. Cole organized the neighbors to get the developer to build a less obtrusive building than what was planned.

"Deb focused on trying to get the developer to do the right thing, and she was able to avoid litigation and a lot of ill will," Mr. Grady says. The building ended up taller than the one proposed, but was redesigned to block sunlight less than it would have otherwise, he adds. "Deb never would have gotten a concession from the developer if she hadn't played hardball." Concessions included extra parking spaces for the neighbors and a design more consistent with that of other buildings on the street.

Says Ms. Cole: "I have more balance in my life now. I'm better able to serve my clients' legal needs, and I'm able to be there for my family when they need me. My only regret is that I didn't do this sooner."



**Jane DiRenzo Pigott**

**Firm:** Fuse3 Group LLC promotes diversity in law firms, corporations and universities.

**Best advice:** "Be willing to get

outside your comfort zone and take risks."

In the mid-1980s, Ms. Pigott was interviewed by the *National Law Journal* for an article about women lawyers who'd returned to large law firms after starting families. "There were so few of us, we were newsworthy," says Ms. Pigott, then a litigation associate at Jenner & Block LLP.

When the writer asked Ms. Pigott's precocious son whether he wanted to be a lawyer someday, Shelby, then 18 months, shook his head and said, "No. It's a girl's job."

The comment confirmed Ms. Pigott's belief in her pioneering path. "I thought, 'I am changing the world, even if just one man thinks that,'" she recalls.

Two decades later, Ms. Pigott, 46—one of the first female equity partners at Winston & Strawn LLP and the first woman to serve on its executive committee—is a corporate consultant supporting the advancement of women and minorities. In January 2003, she co-founded Fuse3 Group with Sharon E. Jones, formerly a senior

counsel at Abbott Laboratories.

"I had been as effective as I could be promoting women within the system, and it seemed like the right time to take my expertise outside," Ms. Pigott says.

The launch of Fuse3 coincides with a growing body of research that shows women face three major obstacles to career advancement: a lack of mentors, a lack of access to social networks and isolation resulting from having too few role models. Among the reasons: Men support other lawyers who are most like themselves and are worried that mentoring a younger woman might send the wrong message, and senior women believe that if they managed without special help, other women should, too, according to The Unfinished Agenda: Women and the Legal Profession, research released in 2001 by the American Bar Assn.'s Commission on Women in the Profession. But women who aren't mentored are more likely to leave, reducing the pool of potential mentors even more, the report says.

"Women and minorities are leaving firms to work for smaller firms, the government or corporations," Ms. Pigott says. "Law firms need to focus on retention and promotion strategies."

Ms. Pigott's services include a presentation called the Rules of the Game. In it, she explains how creating a mentoring network,

promoting herself and seeking high-visibility assignments propelled her to the top in male-dominated law firms.

Clients such as Jenner & Block like her message.

"Jane's thesis of self-empowerment resonated very well with our women partners and associates," says Susan Levy, a litigation partner at Jenner & Block. "Afterward, a lot of women partners said, 'If only someone had told me this 10 years ago when I was an associate.'"

After one year running Fuse3, Ms. Pigott is earning the same salary that she did at Winston & Strawn, she says. As for her long-term goal, she hopes to put herself out of business in the next 10 years: "It will be great when firms and companies no longer need to hire me."



**Edith F. Canter**

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**Best advice:** "Take your time thinking about what type of work would be most fulfilling, and do your homework. Then, dare to take a well-reasoned risk."

As a young lawyer, Ms. Canter relished the daily battles of litigation, which included debating and crafting legal arguments. She also didn't mind a heated exchange with opposing counsel.

But after 15 years in the litigation trenches, Ms. Canter, then 41, was representing plaintiffs in class-action lawsuits and had grown weary of rancorous disagreements. "I no longer enjoyed arguing with opposing counsel over discovery disputes," she says. "I no longer enjoyed worrying about whether opposing counsel, a witness or a client wasn't telling me the whole truth about some aspect of litigation."

Although her hours at Much Shelist Freed Denenberg Ament & Rubenstein P.C. weren't bad, she wanted more flexibility. "It wasn't the most rigorous law firm environment—I worked from 8:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. five days a week, plus occasional weekends, and I billed around 1,800 hours a year," she admits. "But I wanted to work what I call 'flexible full-time.'"

She also was frustrated by her failure to generate new business—a major stumbling block to advancement: "It was hard for me to market the skills of the firm and other people."

After 18 months of soul-searching and networking, Ms. Canter concluded that her dream job didn't exist and decided to create it. In fall 1999, she left Much Shelist and launched two businesses: a law practice, through which she does legal research and writes briefs for other lawyers—mostly solo practitioners; and Persuasion Plus, through which she writes everything from research reports to public relations materials for Chicago-based nonprofit organizations.

"What I liked best about practicing law was the intellectual battle that lawyers do on paper," says Ms. Canter, 46. "Plus, I also wanted to work for non-profit organizations whose missions I could really get behind."

Barat McClain, a litigation partner at Much Shelist, supported Ms. Canter's decision: "Eddie was extremely brave," she says. She reconfigured her career without a role model or the ability to take a client base with her, Ms. McClain adds.

At first, Ms. Canter was terrified that she'd struggle to find clients, but with patience and persistence, she built a solid client base and now divides her time between the two businesses. "Non-profits are used to hiring consultants to pick up the slack when they're overworked or when they need to bring in skills they don't have in-house," says

She has done projects for the Chicago Foundation for Women and the Illinois Facilities Fund, among others. "It's been more challenging to convince lawyers that I can be a profit center for them. I set my rates so that they can make a profit on my time, by billing me out to their clients at more than what they pay me."

Ms. Canter says her rate was more than \$300 per hour at Much Shelist, but declined to elaborate on her current rates for legal services, except to say that they vary depending on the case and her involvement.

George Vernon, a lawyer in

Monroe, Wis., says Ms. Canter's services are cost-effective. "I don't have the time to do the depth of research that Edie does, and to the extent that I would, it would cost my clients a lot more than what Edie charges me," says Mr. Vernon, who specializes in product liability defense.

After five years, Ms. Canter hasn't matched her law firm salary, but says the fulfillment from her work and flexible schedule compensate for lost income. "I'm happy to bring my intellectual and writing skills to the table for other lawyers."

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