

# Careers in Law: Q&A with Candice Cook Simmons, Law Firm Founder and Managing Member

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## Q&A with Candice Cook Simmons, the founder and Managing Member of The Cook Law Group, PLLC. This Q&A is part of Practical Law's Professional Development Series: Careers in Law.

**Education:** 2011: Executive Education Program - Stanford Ignite, Stanford University Graduate School of Business; 2003: J.D., Vanderbilt University Law School; 2001: The University of Oxford Summer Law Program at St. Anne's College, Oxford University; 2000: B.A., University of Virginia

**Summer Clerkship:** Honorable John J. Ellington, Georgia Court of Appeals (Justice Ellington is now an Associate Justice for the Supreme Court of Georgia.)

**Career in Brief:** Candice is the founder and Managing Member of The Cook Law Group, PLLC. Before opening her own firm, Candice began her career as an associate at Bickel & Brewer in corporate commercial litigation. After practicing for seven years, Candice expanded her practice to include intellectual property, technology, and entertainment. Candice was selected as a Rising Star/Super Lawyer of 2018 in New York and has lectured at South by Southwest (SXSW) for several years, including in March of 2019.

### Can you provide a brief description of your current role and the work you do?

I am the Managing Member of The Cook Law Group, PLLC, a firm I founded in 2010. In my role as firm founder, my work includes client development and continued growth and development of the organization by nurturing and supporting thought leadership within the firm. In my role as a lawyer, I work at the intersection of technology, business, and entertainment where I am a counselor and strategic advisor for IP and business-related transactions.

I advise clients and advocate for them by:

- Facilitating negotiations.
- Mapping out business strategies.

- Navigating the client's path to grow within its organization, including strategies to make products and services available to complementary business, technology, or entertainment verticals.

In addition to my "traditional" lawyering work, I am also a lecturer, published writer, and business activist. For my community outreach projects, I work with partners, family foundations, and investors who are passionate about ensuring that marginalized communities (i.e. women and communities of color) are not left out of the conversation surrounding founding and scaling businesses. That includes teaching about the power of intellectual property and highlighting issues, such as the need for access to capital in entrepreneurship efforts. By bridging gaps, we can uplift and enrich all communities and create stronger business communities for everyone.

I think it is really important to ensure that legal issues and advocacy are not always discussed in a reactive way, but that we get proactive in our analysis. Being an attorney not only gives you a platform but also the knowledge base to advocate for individuals that may not be in the room. My writing and speaking, in many instances, are there to amplify voices and issues that require thought leadership and real world application as opposed to just theory.

### What are the factors that led you to establish your own law firm?

I think experience is definitely the best teacher! After working in the legal industry for many years, I was disappointed that law firms in the aggregate were tasked to advise clients on how to pivot and grow and yet the typical law firm is one of the least nimble organizational structures. In my view, traditional law firms were not succeeding because:

- They were not building and retaining talent nor recognizing the strongest skillsets of those within their organizations.
- Attrition rates were abysmal which is a loss of return on investment.
- The organizational cultures were not cultures of growth and innovation internally, but were cultures that represented stagnation.

Instead of complaining about a consistent dearth in innovation, I started evaluating what I could do to change it. I took a sabbatical at a program that was run through Stanford's Graduate School of Business. The program was geared towards innovators and focused on business fundamentals and the formulation and commercialization of ideas. While there, my visionary standpoint reactivated. I realized I had been so indoctrinated in traditional litigation and the practice of law that I lost sight of what the rest of the business world was doing.

After completing the program, it still took a moment for me to realize I needed to open my own firm. At first, I thought there must be an organization I can work for and apply all of this knowledge I have learned! I took some meetings and was fortunate to be extended job offers, but concluded that if I were to accept the positions offered I would be doing the same thing that I believed wasn't working. I could be a great attorney and be proficient at one particular skill, but I do not believe that I am my absolute best practicing within antiquated systems when my clients and the world are working within a framework of disruption and innovation. I wanted to join, lead, and enable this landscape.

I did not find an organization doing things the way I thought they can and should be done. Because I had a book of business, I finally decided to create my own organization. My firm employs a scalable model that reflects how I believe legal work should be provided given the realities of today's business world. I adopted a more holistic approach in terms of advocacy and building businesses and am proud that I manage a business that excels because we believe that service to others is paramount.

**Did you know when you went to law school that this was the kind of work you wanted to do?**

No! I had no earthly idea that I was going open my own firm. If I had to do it all over again, I would do a million things differently. I played it very safe in law school and followed the typical trajectory of going to law school, working as a summer associate, and getting a job at a white-shoe firm. I wrongly believed there was a brass ring for me by climbing the ladder at someone else's firm. That is not to say that you can't get career satisfaction and the opportunity to innovate from someone else's organization. If it's the right organization, I am certain that you can. However, for my path and my career, I learned that I needed to choose another direction. I am an attorney, but I am also an entrepreneur. I enjoy business and working with clients on a variety of issues as an advisor, which needed to be a part of my role as an attorney. Due to the set-up of many firms, that intense connectivity is just not as organic.

A lot of my initial decisions were also driven financially. To move forward, I had to get over financial reward being the sole driving force in my decision-making process. Instead, I chose to have a career built on purpose. I learned that when I found the courage to step out on my own, the economic success soon followed. The bonus is that I have both joy and integrity because I am on the right path for me and on the right mission and know that I am doing good work for the clients that I serve. If I knew then what I know now, I would have crafted my steps to get to this point a lot quicker.

**Are there particular skills or personality characteristics that are essential to be a successful entrepreneur in the legal industry?**

You must have a hunger for knowledge because as an entrepreneur you are constantly learning and re-learning. Before opening a law firm, my advice is to:

- Spend a lot of time studying the big picture, including learning where all the players are and where they fit.
- Analyze other successful entrepreneurs to identify and learn how to create an organization with a culture that reflects your criteria for success.
- Determine how to create deliverables and meet deadlines in an innovative way that still yields a profit for the law firm.
- Consider developing a strategy on how to break away from the billable hour in your firm despite it being the safe and long-standing approach in the legal industry.
- If aligned with your organizational goals, evaluate how to recruit and promote underrepresented groups and how to achieve that goal from a place of integrity.

I also recommend taking the following approaches:

- **Welcome change.** Change is inevitable, so resistance to change is futile. For example, as artificial intelligence continues to permeate the legal industry, it is increasingly important for lawyers to consider how to differentiate a lawyer's counseling task from a task that can be duplicated with machine-learning.
- **Gain work experience before starting law school.** I believe that students should not go straight from college to law school. Work in the legal industry (for example, as a paralegal) or work in an industry you are interested in advising as an attorney in the future. The more industry experience a lawyer has, the more the lawyer can appreciate how their legal recommendations impact the business from a holistic perspective.
- **Embrace fearless advocacy.** Clients come to counselors for answers. There is nothing more lawyerly (and annoying) than answering a question "yes and no." For our clients, the question must have an answer because a decision needs to be made. It is important to be zealous advocates for our clients but also to be willing to answer a question without hedging. If the client is normally the leader at their organization and they are coming to you for advice, you must not only be capable but also be willing to lead.

**What have been the biggest challenges you have encountered in your legal career?**

Shifts in the legal industry occur at a glacial pace. When taking a different approach in an established industry, there is a danger in being first to market.

**If you were not a lawyer, business strategist, or entrepreneur, what job do you think you would have?**

I would be a showrunner on a legal drama to put my writing and creativity to good use. It would be great to have a way to communicate all my experiences in the legal world and also to create commentary on cases ripped from the headlines. I believe there are issues in our world that need to be discussed and a great approach

to start the conversation is through entertainment. It's hard for all of us to see ourselves in a mirror but entertainment provides a safety net of "maybe this is not real." Because the commentary can be from afar, often we are able to start having meaningful dialogue on how to resolve issues in our communities.

**What advice would you give to an attorney considering a career as a managing partner?**

Businesses that are innovative need innovative counsel. It is important to learn the difference between lawyering (understanding the law) and counseling (understanding the business landscape). Being willing to counsel your clients can be a plus for you as you build your book of business.

As a managing partner or member of a law firm, it is also important to cultivate a balance between actually doing the work for your clients and growing the business from a marketing and revenue perspective. Don't fall into the danger of only doing the work and assuming that everyone knows you are doing it.

The other thing that is really important is that entrepreneurship and leadership in the law is an ego-less job. There can't be anything that you are too good to do. It's easy to get used to

having the support of two secretaries and a night box where you drop off your work and pick it up in the morning. Those things are amazing, but you should also be able to type it out yourself, be able to dictate it yourself, and understand where you need to delegate. If it can be done by you, do it. This gives you the opportunity to experience any inefficiencies firsthand and implement a plan to cure them. I believe it's really important for people to drop the ego and really be ready to get down and dirty with the business of creating a business.

**Is there any general advice that you wish someone had given to you when you started out that you can share?**

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I would advise attorneys that want to start their own firm to think about how to create the type of organization that you view as successful. Evaluate how to have a scalable business model without the constant need for infusions of capital. Be courageous enough to innovate and try new approaches to age-old problems. Also, consider how to attract and retain brilliant minds within your organization that reflect what global leadership looks like now.

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