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The White Collar Boutique 'Renaissance' Is Here

By **Phillip Bantz**

Law360 (July 24, 2026, 8:38 PM EDT) -- Unprecedented political pressure on BigLaw, dwindling opportunities at elite firms, powerful legal tech tools and broad slowdowns in white collar enforcement are fueling a remarkable boom in boutique law firm growth, experts say.

For years, lawyers have been splitting with established law firms to strike out on their own. But what has traditionally been a relatively slow and steady trend has experienced a recent spike, with more lawyers exiting BigLaw and the government to build their own practices, according to lawyers and consultants who spoke with Law360.

"This will become much more commonplace," said Sam Nicholls, director of Kindleworth LLP, a London-based consulting firm that specializes in launching boutique law firms and has clients throughout the world, including in the U.S. The firm plans to open a New York office later this year.

As the motivating forces behind launching boutiques have increased, the barriers for starting firms — namely overhead costs and business logistics — have decreased, according to T.J. Henry Jr., co-founder and managing partner of Federate Legal Inc., a Bellevue, Washington-based managed services organization that also helps build boutique law practices.

"AI is part of it, but technology in general, whether it's traditional SaaS [software as a service] or otherwise, has certainly helped people's ability to think that they can start their own firm in a much quicker fashion and be more successful," he said.

Over the past two years, more than a dozen prominent boutique shops, many of which feature white collar law practices, have launched. They include New York-based Treanor Devlin Brown PLLC and the Washington, D.C.-headquartered firms of Armstrong & Bradylyons PLLC, Lowell & Associates PLLC and Dunn Isaacson Rhee LLP.

Founding partners and lawyers at those firms recently spoke with Law360 about why they struck out on their own to build or join boutique practices, and why they think others will follow in their footsteps.

"We're at a real renaissance in terms of the opportunity and ability to practice in ways that we want to shape and can shape," said Jeannie Rhee, who **co-founded** litigation boutique Dunn Isaacson Rhee, or DIR, in May 2025 with three of her fellow former partners from Paul Weiss Rifkind Wharton & Garrison LLP.

They were among a group of lawyers who **parted ways** with Paul Weiss after the firm **entered into a deal** to provide $40 million in free legal work to President Donald Trump's administration in exchange for Trump dropping an executive order barring the firm from securing government contracts and entering federal buildings.

Rhee declined to speak directly about how her former firm's reaction to pressure from the Trump administration might have influenced her decision to build a boutique, but said "it's incredibly important to stand up and champion for the rule of law."

"As soon as we were able to stand up, we were really happy to partner with longstanding nonprofit organizations and advocacy groups that we have deep relationships with personally and professionally to take on cases for causes that are right," she added. "It's incredibly important to hold people in power to account."

Earlier this month, DIR joined with Democracy Forward, Public Citizen and Planned Parenthood Federation of America in representing a coalition of organizations and local governments suing the Trump administration in D.C. federal court over alleged "unlawful changes" to the federal Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program.

Eight other BigLaw firms that entered into pro bono settlements with the administration also have lost attorneys following the deals, and some have landed at boutique practices, including Lowell & Associates. The firm's roster includes former Skadden Arps Slate Meagher & Flom LLP associates Brenna Trout Frey and Rachel Cohen, who **resigned in protest** over Skadden's response to Trump's pressure campaign.

"The rise in the creation of some of these boutique white collar and litigation shops can be attributed to the increased pressure on large firms to capitulate or refrain from taking on matters that are adverse to this administration," David Kolansky, counsel at Lowell & Associates, which **launched** in May 2025, told Law360.

Kolansky and Lowell & Associates founder Abbe David Lowell both split from Winston & Strawn LLP, which is now Winston Taylor LLP. The firm did not enter into a settlement deal with the Trump administration, but Kolansky said he and Lowell moved to a boutique practice so they "would be able to take on clients without fear of being blocked by management for political reasons."

"At a macro level, one of the reasons for the breakoff has been the ability to take on matters, particularly individuals, without concern or obstacles from large firm management," Kolansky added.

Others have left BigLaw for boutiques not so much because of politics, but because they desire more freedom in general. That could include being able to take on clients without worrying about potential business conflicts between practice groups and existing clients, or having alternative fee arrangements instead of traditional hourly billing, experts said.

"We are trying to get away from the hourly billing system," Rhee said. "From my vantage point, there's often a disconnect and a misalignment of incentives when you are billing by the hour rather than trying to drive an efficient and optimal outcome."

Smaller firms with lower overhead costs can also offer more competitive rates than larger firms, a factor that continues to fuel the growth of boutiques.

"We don't market ourselves as a competitor to big firms," said Scott Armstrong of Armstrong & Bradylyons. "We market ourselves as a force multiplier for big firms."

While BigLaw represents corporations, smaller firms like Armstrong's can focus on representing individuals caught up in white collar prosecutions, he said. And while BigLaw hourly rates can top $2,000, his firm charges about half that much, he added.

"Right now, we're intentionally carving out a slot below the big firm rates so we can grab more of this individual work," Armstrong said.

At the same time, many major corporations have warmed to the idea of relying on smaller firms for representation in high-stakes matters. DIR's clients, for instance, include Amazon, Google, Meta, Pfizer, Qualcomm and Uber.

"The other piece of this [boutique trend] is the comfort and acceptance of Fortune Five, Fortune 10, Fortune 50 clients to use boutiques in bet-the-company litigation, for which you are getting board approval," Rhee said.

The boutique boom also is being driven, in part, by BigLaw leaders moving away from promoting lawyers to equity or ownership partner roles and instead expanding the ranks of salaried or nonequity partners, experts said. That is turning some lawyers off to pursuing careers at large firms.

A 2026 Citi Hildebrandt Client Advisory survey published in December 2025 showed a nearly 10% drop year-over-year in the number of law firm leaders who said they planned to increase equity partnerships.

"The promise of what it is to be a partner in the old school sense of the word has kind of gone," said Nicholls at Kindleworth. "It's taking a lot longer to get to full equity," which is "probably going to drive entrepreneurial people who want to get ahead and be successful to maybe think about doing something differently."

Younger lawyers interested in practicing white collar law might also be finding it difficult to even land associate positions at large firms, some of which have scaled down hiring in their white collar groups because the work has slowed as a result of a general pullback of white collar enforcement under the Trump administration.

Jon Sale, co-chair of Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough LLP's white collar and government investigations practice, **told Law360** in June that his firm was encouraging potential hires who were "top-notch students from major law schools" to consider civil litigation rather than white collar work, even though that was their area of interest.

"Younger attorneys are more willing to start their own firms these days than they have been because the pathway to success is not just join a law firm, work a number of years and become a partner," said Henry at Federate Legal.

He added: "Each generation is more willing to take a bit more risk on building something than the prior generation has been."

The exodus of attorneys from the U.S. Department of Justice, due at least in part to pressure from the administration to prosecute Trump's perceived foes, is another factor behind the rise in boutique firms, experts said. In the not-too-distant past, leaving the DOJ and starting a firm without a book of existing clients was seen as a great risk. But it's now "the path more traveled" as BigLaw has pulled back on hiring, Armstrong said.

"With the downshift in white collar enforcement that we've seen in this administration, the demand to hire DOJ alums has diminished considerably," said Armstrong, who left the agency in 2024 and joined boutique white collar firm McGovern Weems before **launching his own firm** in February.

The trend is fueling itself as lawyers who have gone out on their own and succeeded are serving as models for those who are considering hanging out a shingle or joining a small firm.

"When we were thinking about this as a possibility, we reached out to ask questions of other boutiques, and they were unbelievably generous," said Rhee at DIR. "It's an incredibly welcoming and supportive community."

When Arlo Devlin-Brown left Covington & Burling LLP a year ago to launch a boutique practice, he said he felt like an "object of curiosity" as lawyers, some of whom he knew well and others not so much, reached out and "sort of picked my brain about what it's like."

"The two questions that come up are how much does it cost to start something like this, and will the clients come?" he told Law360.

Startup costs can vary significantly depending on the size and nature of the practice and its location, but expenses can be tamed with the use of shared office space and legal tech to trim time spent on document review, research and timekeeping, for example.

The question about attracting clients has a more straightforward answer.

"What I've told people is that if they have had success developing clients at their existing practices, they will likely have success outside of that as well," Devlin-Brown said. "Perhaps more success."

--Editing by Nicole Bleier and Philip Shea.