

# Talented People Look for Meaning in Their Careers

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Jennifer Selendy, Selendy & Gay's co-managing partner, spoke with Legal 500 about the firm's recent successes, creating a culture of excellence, and the challenges facing women in the legal profession.

*(Excerpts from this Q&A were originally published in The Legal 500)*

**Legal 500: In recognition of the firm's two-year anniversary, can you start by telling us about the key successes for Selendy & Gay to date?**

**Jennifer Selendy:** We set out to build something different and something that could drive excellence and a collaborative, client-centered service. So, the quality of the practice we've built over these past few years is one of the things I am most proud of.

We are leading some of the most interesting cases out there for important clients, and we have had a string of incredible victories in our first two years. Right alongside that success is the caliber of people we have been able to attract – associates from the top law schools and many of them having come from extraordinary clerkships. We've had a resoundingly positive response from the talent pool and have a phenomenal cadre of associates working with us.

**L500: How would you define the differences between Selendy & Gay and your Big Law competitors, and what has been the biggest difference for you personally?**

**JS:** Again, I think back to conditions of excellence where people can perform at their best. We think about the law with a lot of reverence. We take pride in our ability to take a stand on the issues we care about – whether it's climate change or anti-competitive practices or anything else. We stand up for what we believe in in a way other big law firms cannot, in part because of their diversified practices and interests. With a focus on litigation only, we don't have a corporate practice, for example, so we can champion cases and causes without those conflicts.

The most talented people nowadays are looking for meaning in their career and in their lives. They care about what they're doing and the impact it has for good. The rise and influence of legal journalism has contributed, in part, to a drive for firms to have the highest profit per partner and to publish that data. The problem is not in wanting to be the most profitable – because we're no different than any other firm in that regard – but there has been an injection of bad elements into the competition, not only for clients, but also for the profession. We don't publish our profits. We don't want to compete for talent that way, by letting people know that if they come to us they're going to make the most money. We want people coming in for the right reasons. They see our commercial success and the quality of our practice, but we don't want money to be the primary factor.

The other thing is, if you want a collaborative partnership and firm overall, you have to put client service ahead of origination credit. To compete for talent, many firms have stepped away from lockstep compensation, which can generate unnecessary competitiveness and disincentivizes collaboration. For me, it has been transformative to staff matters according to who's the best person to work on the case for the client, without regard to how it's going to affect compensation. It's another example of our commitment to client service.

**L500: Looking at Selendy & Gay, what differences do you think exist as a result of having a women-owned and female majority firm?**

**JS:** You have to start by understanding that we never set out to have a female majority firm, only to choose the lawyers we most wanted to practice with in a new firm. We came together as a group of lawyers that wanted a new type of firm and it was a meritocratic endeavor. As it turns out, we have more than half women. The men who are part of this firm grew up working shoulder to shoulder with female

lawyers as their equals. They mentor female lawyers as well as male lawyers, and that is the condition for a meritocracy.

For women specifically, when you are growing up, your parents tell you that you can be anything you want and that you could even be President of the United States. And when you're a little girl in this country, and you look at all the presidents to date, you think 'really'? So, I also place great value on having young women lawyers grow up in a firm where they have female role models. You look at all the women partners in our firm who've become partners in Big Law, but not by doing it the same way in terms of how we strike a work-life balance and how we develop client relationships. It's not just that there's one woman, there's a group of women who did it in different ways, who made their profession a priority in their life and balanced that with other things that were also priorities.

A young woman at our firm can see multiple female role models and I think that is very empowering in keeping women in the profession. Years ago, I was involved in founding the Women's Leadership Initiative at Kirkland & Ellis and we started doing exit interviews with female associates who were leaving. I remember one associate saying there were two women partners in her entire department and she couldn't see herself as either one, they were just so different. It was impactful to me that even when there were women leaders in the department, when there's just one or two it still might not feel like you have a role model.

## **L500: To finish, what advantages do you think working with Selendy & Gay has for clients?**

**JS:** If we achieve our goals of creating the conditions for consistent excellence in the delivery of client services, we're going to keep up the trend we've had of securing a great number of trial wins, motion wins, and settlements. It's about being known for getting results. That's true for us because we can take a case all the way to trial, win on appeal, and win at summary judgment because we bring the right resources to bear for our clients regardless of whose client relationship it is.

I, for the first time in my entire career, at Selendy & Gay can say there are cases that I brought in where the client and the relationships were mine, where I did not bill more than an hour or two getting the case set up and introducing my other partners. I never have to worry about getting compensation credit for that. I can give the case to the partner who has the right experience to run it.

Clients know what they're getting from us. We think about cases in a way that is always focused on their end game, whether they want to go to trial or not. We know what it is to get a case and see it all the way through trial. We have incredible courtroom experience and the way we move cases along maximizes the chance to win on summary judgment or to get a settlement, and we put together powerful trial teams. So I think that is a big differentiator. A lot of times, litigation departments in Big Law will have one or two big name trial lawyers and not every litigator working on the case really understands how to get a case to trial, and to drive it forward towards that.

I also think our experiences on both the plaintiff's side and the defense side gives us a lot of perspective that is valuable for our clients. They appreciate that if we are defending them, we can anticipate the moves of our adversaries because we've been on the plaintiff side of similar cases. On the flip side, we know how defense lawyers act and tend to think in certain circumstances.

The proof is in the pudding. We have many instances where clients have come and placed their trust in us on absolutely critical matters. We respect that tremendously, and the caliber of our practice allows us to excel in those complex cases. That is and ties back to your first question about our key success.

Read the [full interview in The Legal 500](#).

## **Attorney**

- Jennifer Selendy