

How We Founded a Law Firm: 'Find Great Partners to Build With,' Says Kara Maciel & Eric Conn of Conn Maciel Carey

By ALM Staff

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Kara Maciel and Eric Conn, Co-Founding Partners at Conn Maciel Carey, Washington, D.C.

Practice area(s): *Maciel:* Labor and employment, and litigation; *Conn:* OSHA, workplace safety

Law school and year of graduation: *Kara:* American University Washington College of Law, 2001; *Conn:* University of Virginia Law School, 2000

The following has been edited for style.

When did you found your firm? Why?

Maciel: In 2013, my second child—my daughter—was born. At that time, I realized I wanted more flexibility and control over my work, including the type of legal work I did, the clients I served, and how I billed for my services. I wanted the freedom to determine my own rate structure and how I delivered value to my corporate clients. In addition, I wanted to be a strong role model for my daughter to show her that, as a woman, you can lead, you can own a business, and you can define your own career path.

Conn: Personally, I worked at large law firms early in my career and gained a lot from those experiences. But something was missing. I wanted to build something lasting—a legacy my children could be proud of. Professionally, the kind of work I do, workplace safety and health law, is not a great fit for the big law firm model. At those firms, because our hourly rates had to be so high, our clients generally would only get us involved after a catastrophe had occurred. The high rates and inflexibility were not conducive to proactive engagement and in helping



Courtesy photos

Kara M. Maciel (L) and Eric J. Conn (R) of Conn Maciel Carey

our clients with small problems before they became big problems. To me, true partnership with my clients means helping them prevent those big problems, not just responding to them. That requires trust, accessibility, and flexibility. At a smaller and more agile boutique platform, our clients feel comfortable calling us early, when issues are still small. We help them manage risk, protect employees, and address problems before they escalate. We still handle the big events—but we do so with greater value, more impact, and a true commitment to long-term safety and success.

Were you a partner or in a leadership position at another firm before founding your firm? If so, which one? How long were you there?

Maciel: Epstein Becker Green, partner, seven years; Krupin O'Brien, associate, three years

Conn: Epstein Becker Green, partner, five years; McDermott Will & Emery, partner, four years; an associate for seven years

Were there any surprises you faced after becoming a law firm founder?

When we started our firm, we launched our first office in Washington, D.C. We brought over several members of our team from our former law firm, and the initial goal was simply to establish a strong presence in D.C. We named the firm Conn Maciel Carey and organized it as a PLLC (Professional Limited Liability Company), for a variety of strategic and legal reasons. However, shortly after launching, we realized we needed a presence in California as well. We brought on a new partner based in California and opened a West Coast office. But California is unique—it's the only state that does not recognize the PLLC legal structure. Because of that, we had to form our California office as an LLP (Limited Liability Partnership), and essentially a separate law firm. This created some early challenges, as we were operating under two different legal structures across our offices. Coordinating and maintaining consistency between the PLLC in D.C. and the LLP in California required extra effort, especially in the firm's early years.

Maciel: This is not exactly a surprise, but more of a relief. We were intentional and respectful in our departure—we didn't solicit any clients or colleagues before launching. That made it all the more meaningful when the clients we contacted chose to follow us, and every team member we invited joined us without hesitation. It reaffirmed our value as lawyers, as partners, and as people others wanted to build something new with.

What's been the biggest change, day-to-day, in your routine since becoming a founder of a law firm?

A significant portion of our time is dedicated to firm management and administration. This includes staying on top of our finances, billing processes, insurance, tax, and managing relationships with third-party vendors. Beyond the numbers, we also focus heavily on firm culture and human resources issues, ensuring that we maintain a positive, productive workplace.

We also devote our time making sure our firm runs smoothly and successfully on an operational

level. This includes supporting our staff and their managers, ensuring they have the tools, resources, and guidance needed to perform their jobs effectively. Whether it's improving workflows, addressing personnel needs, or streamlining administrative processes, our goal is to create an environment where every department functions at its best.

We also have a third managing partner, Aaron Gelb, who joined our firm a few years after we founded it. Between the three of us we divide and conquer these responsibilities, playing to our strengths and availability. We hold weekly management meetings with our chief operating officer to review critical operational issues and make strategic decisions together. Throughout the week, we remain flexible and available to handle tasks such as interviewing new hires or responding to urgent matters, ensuring that no detail is overlooked. This collaborative approach helps us maintain a balanced and efficient leadership style, allowing us to focus on both the firm's growth and the quality of service we provide to our clients.

What do you think was the deciding point for launching your own firm? Was it a specific case? A personality trait? Making connections with the right people?

Maciel: For Eric and me, it was about where we were in our lives both personally and professionally. We were each raising young families and thinking more intentionally about the kind of work environment we wanted to be part of and help create. Our practices are highly complementary given that we both advise employers on workplace regulation and compliance, and we realized our work aligned in a meaningful way. We also shared a belief that we could serve our clients more effectively in a different kind of setting—one that was more transparent, flexible, and supportive for both our clients and ourselves.

Conn: Things really shifted for me when my first son was born. I had thought about starting my own firm for years, but it always felt daunting and often unnecessary. But over time, the need for a new kind of platform became clearer. Kara and I were in similar places, each finding success in our practices, but realizing that to keep growing, we had to make bold decisions. We believed we could do things differently

and better. We shared a vision. Our teams were similar in size, our kids were close in age, and we were aligned in what success looked like. At a time when many law firms were struggling, we believed we could build something stronger. We looked at each other and said, “We can do better. Let’s go for it... and our teams are young enough that if doesn’t work, we won’t have ruined anyone’s career!”

How do you utilize technology to benefit the firm/practice and/or business development?

When we started the firm, we made a deliberate decision to go fully cloud-based from day one. All of our core systems, document management, timekeeping, and billing, are hosted in the cloud. We don’t maintain traditional paper files, and we never built out a physical law library. We’ve leaned heavily on technology to streamline our daily operations, and that’s allowed us to maintain significantly lower overhead than a typical large law firm. It’s been a critical factor in our ability to stay agile and efficient.

Also, at the time the COVID pandemic hit, we were still a relatively young firm. One of the biggest shifts we saw during that period was the rapid normalization of virtual meetings. Of course, video technology like FaceTime and Skype existed before, but platforms like Zoom and Teams suddenly became the default method of communication—not just a backup option. That shift made a huge difference in how we functioned.

We have attorneys spread across the country, and the virtual environment has allowed us to coordinate seamlessly despite geographic distance. We host an annual webinar series for each of our core practice areas and conduct frequent firmwide meetings and trainings remotely. While we didn’t invent the technology, we fully embraced it. It’s become central to how we manage and grow the firm, enabling us to stay connected, efficient, and client-focused, even with a distributed team. It’s been a huge part of our success as a modern, national boutique law firm, and vital to staying connected and maintaining the culture that was a foundational reason we started the firm.

What advice would you give to someone whose goal is to start their own firm?

Maciel: One of the best resources I recommend is the local bar association’s course on starting your

own firm. It covers the essential nuts and bolts, from business structure to compliance. It’s a must for anyone thinking of hanging their own shingle. That said, some of the best advice I received is that while lawyers are often great at lawyering and client relationships, they may not naturally excel at running the operational side of a business, things like payroll, insurance, taxes, HR policies, and compliance. So, be prepared: either accept that some of your time will shift from client work to operations, or invest in people who can manage those functions. Knowing your strengths and where you need support is key to long-term success.

Conn: My biggest advice is to find great partners to build with. Starting a firm is incredibly challenging and requires a tremendous amount of hard work. I truly admire those who launch solo practices, it’s no small feat. But for us, success wouldn’t have been possible without a strong core team from the start: great co-founders and colleagues who shared our business values, practice philosophy, and work ethic. These were people we genuinely respected and wanted to be around, especially during those early, intense days of heavy lifting to get the firm off the ground. You can’t do this kind of work with people you don’t trust and respect. So my advice: surround yourself with smart, committed people who share your vision and values.

Who had the greatest influence in your career that helped propel you to launch your own firm?

Maciel: I wouldn’t credit just one person, but rather all the mentors who trained me and helped shape me into a strong lawyer. They also taught me how to develop my own business and build direct client relationships. Over time, growing my own client base, outside the shadow of more senior attorneys, gave me the confidence to lead. When I eventually started my own firm, I was able to invite those clients to join me, not just follow a name on a door. They came because of the trust we had built and the relationship we had formed. That foundation, being seen as their adviser, not just a representative of a firm, made all the difference.

Conn: I’ve had several mentors, but the most influential was Bob Gombar, the first general counsel of the OSH Review Commission and my

first professional boss at McDermott Will & Emery. He's truly a pioneer; generally considered the godfather of OSHA law. At the Review Commission, he helped shape the field by writing its earliest legal opinions and interpretations. Later, he entered private practice and essentially created the role of the private law firm OSHA lawyer, building a successful practice at McDermott Will & Emery, where I worked with him for 11 years. Bob taught me the substance of OSHA law and how to manage a team in a crisis-driven, highly specialized practice. He has remained a mentor and advocate long after I left MWE, and gave me the confidence to start my own firm.

Knowing what you know now, if you had a chance to advise or mentor your younger self (at any stage), what advice would you give to yourself and/or what would you do differently?

Maciel: Always lead with authenticity and follow your passions, whether it's the subject matter you want to practice or the industry you want to focus on. When you genuinely enjoy your work, it shows. Clients can sense when you're being real, and that builds trust. For me, one of my focus industries is hospitality. I'm a foodie, I love to travel, and I enjoy dining out. That personal passion gives me a real connection to the industry. I understand the inner workings, what it's like behind the scenes, the challenges of housekeeping, and the demands of running a restaurant. When clients see that I truly understand their world, it deepens the relationship. That authenticity makes a difference.

Conn: I consider myself fortunate to have found an incredible team when starting my own OSHA practice and this firm. Along the way, many talented and dedicated people have joined us, which has been a real blessing. A lot of our success comes down to timing and a bit of luck. I really can't think of what I would do differently, honestly.

Do you have a prediction on how the legal industry will evolve over the next several years?

Maciel: AI is absolutely at the forefront of emerging issues. We're already seeing companies across industries trying to understand how best to implement it. In the legal field, in particular, the implications are significant. While AI holds great

promise for improving efficiency and access to information, we've also seen serious missteps—such as lawyers relying on AI-generated content without proper verification, leading to ethical and legal consequences. As the technology continues to evolve, I expect the conversation around AI's responsible use—especially in regulated professions like law—to grow substantially in the coming years. It's an area we all need to watch closely.

Conn: From the lens of my regulatory practice, especially areas like OSHA and environmental law, I think we're entering one of the most transformative periods since the FDR Administration. Under the Trump Administration, there's a clear and deliberate effort to consolidate the regulatory state, return more power regulatory authority to Congress and the President, and reduce the role of the bureaucracy. As a result, I expect the landscape to look very different in three years. Agencies will become smaller, if they survive, and administrative adjudication, like hearings before administrative law judges, could disappear altogether. The Supreme Court has already begun questioning their legality. That means our practice may shift toward either state-by-state regulatory work or more complex and formal federal court litigation. Either way, we'll need to stay nimble and ready to adapt quickly.

What is the one behavior or trait that you have seen derail other leaders' careers?

Maciel: I believe a major source of client frustration is a lack of transparency, particularly when it comes to fee estimates and billing. No client should ever be surprised by an invoice. It's essential to maintain clear and consistent communication throughout the engagement. That means regularly updating clients on how much time is being spent, what the current issues are, and what progress is being made. Clients can become frustrated if they feel that more time is being spent on a task than seems necessary, especially without explanation. In my experience, poor communication and a lack of transparency are among the most common reasons clients look for new counsel.

Conn: One of the most damaging dynamics in law firm leadership is short-sighted selfishness—leaders who prioritize personal gain above all else.

While law is a business and we all work to support our families, decisions driven solely by self-interest weaken the team. If leadership is too focused on maximizing their own individual bottom line, they risk losing the people who make the firm strong. A successful firm functions as a true team, where everyone feels valued and aligned toward a common goal. When that's missing, turnover is inevitable. One of the things I'm most proud of at our firm is our remarkably low turnover. We've grown steadily over time, and very few people have left. I believe that's because our team knows they matter—and that leadership is committed to building something meaningful for everyone, not just for themselves.

Please share with us any firm or industry initiatives that you are working on as well as the impact you hope to achieve.

Over the past year, we've expanded our offerings by developing a series of Masterclass programs. Traditionally, much of our work—whether in OSHA or employment law—has been reactive, helping clients respond to incidents, employee complaints, or agency enforcement actions. Recently, we've placed greater emphasis on proactive support, including compliance strategies, program development, and training. As part of that effort, we've created in-depth Masterclasses covering key areas of OSHA compliance—such as injury and illness recordkeeping, OSHA inspections, and machine safety. These sessions go beyond typical webinars, offering a deeper dive for both new team members and experienced safety professionals. They've proven to be valuable tools for introducing complex regulatory topics and reinforcing best practices. We've seen strong interest from clients, and we're continuing to expand these programs—both on the OSHA side and in our employment law practice.

What career advice do you wish more people would ask you? (e.g. "if you just listened to me you could have...")

Maciel: You shouldn't be afraid to dive into a unique or emerging area within your practice and make

it your own. Becoming an expert in a developing niche can really set you apart. A clear example was right after COVID hit. Suddenly, there were new federal, state, and local regulations, and no one had a playbook. C-suite leaders were turning to HR and safety professionals, asking how to protect employees and customers while keeping operations running. Because our firm had strong collaboration between labor, employment, and workplace safety, we were in a unique position to provide guidance. That experience highlighted how specializing—especially in a timely or novel area—can create real value and opportunity.

Conn: One piece of advice I often share is to specialize. With so many law school graduates and practicing attorneys, the more you can distinguish yourself, the better. For me, that meant focusing on a narrow niche: workplace safety and health law. It's a small field, so with dedication, it's possible to quickly become a recognized expert. I often joke that after a few months on our team, you're already among the top OSHA lawyers in the country because it's such a small pond. Specialization has been key to my success and is a powerful way for any lawyer to stand out in a crowded market.

As a law firm founder, what impact would you like to have on your firm and/or the legal industry as a whole?

We celebrated our 10th anniversary last year with a big event, and one of the most meaningful parts was reflecting on how far our team has come. Over the past decade, we've seen so many people—especially staff who joined us without prior law firm experience—grow into true professionals. One team member now leads our marketing department, having learned key law firm marketing strategies on the job. Another started as an assistant, earned her SHRM certification, and is now growing into an HR leadership role. It's incredibly rewarding to see people take advantage of the opportunities and training we provide, and build careers they're proud of. That kind of growth is a core part of our firm's mission.