



THE **RECORD**ER



Rudhir Krishtel. Courtesy photo.

EXPERT OPINION

Mergers Are About People, Not Paperwork: Here's Why

Beyond the spreadsheets, contracts, and press releases lies the real challenge—and opportunity—of a merger: bringing people together and expanding on services collectively.

February 03, 2025 at 12:00 PM

🕒 8 minute read

By Rudhir Krishtel

A merger isn't just a business transaction; it's a human experience. Beyond the spreadsheets, contracts, and press releases lies the real challenge—and opportunity—of a merger: bringing people together and expanding on services collectively.

Over the past decade, mergers have evolved from opportunities for scale to becoming critical tools for survival and innovation. In Q3 2024, the legal industry finalized 41 mergers—matching the same period in 2023, according to [Andrew Maloney's article](#) in The American Lawyer. These consistent figures, however, mask the powerful forces reshaping the legal landscape.

Escalating competition for talent, heightened client demand for specialization, and the race to expand geographically are driving firms to embrace mergers as a strategic necessity. Analysts predict an inevitable uptick in activity for 2025, as firms continue to seek ways to differentiate and grow. However, more mergers don't necessarily equate to more *successful* mergers. Mergers don't fail because of strategy or scale—they fail because leaders miss the opportunity to build trust where it matters most.

“Effective collaboration is grounded in trust, which, in my experience in law firms, can only be achieved through cultivating confident, mutually beneficial, relationship-driven connections,” said Jennifer Manton,

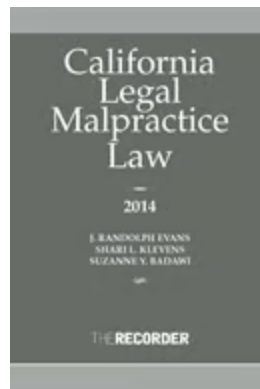
managing director, chief marketing and business development at Kramer Levin Naftalis & Frankel. The heart of any successful merger is its people. Mergers are more than transactions—they're transformations. Headlines may focus on market share or expanded scale, but the true work of a merger begins with integrating people, culture and systems. Without alignment in these areas, firms risk missing the very opportunities they desire to create.

Treat Internal Relationship Development Like Business Development

Start by building trust with your new colleagues. A merger's potential lies in its people. Without strong internal relationships, the expanded scale or practice depth won't deliver value. To lead effectively during this period, it's best to approach internal connections with the same focus and strategy lawyers bring to client relationships.

As Jaime Drozd, managing partner at Davis Wright Tremaine, whose firm has recent merger experience, explains:

RECOMMENDED FOR YOU



California Legal Malpractice Law

This book addresses both the fabric of California legal malpractice law and the cases and issues confronting attorneys.

[View This Book](#) 

“Integration is critical to business development efforts following a merger or combination. It’s not just a matter of having an expanded list of capabilities that may be relevant to a client. There needs to be a level of trust between the new partners and an understanding of how the firm’s combined platform can not only offer the client a greater range of legal expertise, but a higher level of service.”

During the first months post-merger, invest in genuine connections. Pick up the phone, set a meeting, and spend one-on-one time with your new colleagues. Set a personal goal of a specific number of such calls per week. Learn about your colleagues’ goals, values and challenges, not just their practice areas. Don’t look for opportunities for yourself, contemplate how you can help them and help expand their practice. These insights foster alignment and open the door to deeper collaboration.

Ask yourself, “Who else should I meet?” and create opportunities to connect colleagues across practice areas and offices. Every introduction strengthens the fabric of the newly combined firm.

“Very early on in the merger discussions between Troutman Pepper and Locke Lord, we prioritized our practices across the firm getting together, getting to know more about each other, and making them aware of the cross-collaboration opportunities that would be available in a combined firm,” said Daniel Pulka, chief business development and marketing officer at Troutman Pepper Locke. “More than 200 partners from Troutman Pepper met 200 partners from Locke Lord before we even combined with the goal of how we can better serve our clients with our combined resources.”

Remember, consistency matters. Relationships aren’t built overnight. Commit to ongoing outreach well beyond the merger’s early days to ensure those connections deepen and sustain the firm’s growth

potential. If you connect with someone in January, set a follow-up reminder to meet again in March or April.

Bilal Zaheer, partner at Troutman Pepper Locke, formed through a recent merger with Troutman Pepper and his legacy firm, Locke Lord, emphasizes the importance of a systematic approach to internal business development, stating:

"Create a list of colleagues to meet across offices, map out visits to key locations, use firm support to reach out and introduce yourself, and develop a six-month plan to capitalize on the energy and resources immediately post-merger."

By focusing on building trust in these new relationships, leaders ensure the merger becomes more than a structural change—it becomes a cultural transformation.

Take a Systematic and Proactive Approach to the Game of Telephone

Relationships don't build themselves. Think of your first three months as your chance to plant seeds for collaboration that can grow over time.

When you meet, go beyond the usual introductions. Learn your new colleagues' value propositions and make sure they understand yours. Get a real sense of their ideal clients and target markets, what the pain points are for those industries or client avatars, and how your new colleague supports these industries, issues and challenges.

"Beyond understanding new colleagues' legal skills," says Drozd, "it's critical to develop an understanding of what each firm brings to the table and how to integrate all the components—from technology tools to skilled business professionals to process improvements—that help support superior client service. That takes time, and a focused and sustained effort to think about every client touchpoint."

Act While the Energy Is High

The early days of a merger are a shrinking window of opportunity—a rare moment when people are eager to connect and build relationships. Leaders who act quickly during this phase can turn initial excitement into lasting collaboration. As Zaheer puts it:

"Law firm mergers are like creating a blended family—there's initial excitement and eagerness to connect, and the sooner you can take advantage of that, the more likely you are to see benefits from the merger. The key is to strike early: make introductions and ask for meetings with new colleagues, and show up at firm events while people are still open and engaged. Remember, the infrastructure is there, but the firm won't merge itself—energy and human connection require active participation from the lawyers."

Let Clients Know How the Merger Will Help

Understand why the merger will be a value to your clients and communicate this to them. Walk in your clients' shoes and think about how your new colleagues, evolving structure, geographic footprint, and integrated approach will support their individual needs.

Clients are always happy to receive a quick and personalized update on ways you can help them succeed in their goals. Use the merger as an opportunity to touch base and share these specifics. Clients remember you are thinking about them and will continue to keep you top of mind.

Drozd adds: "There may be quick wins where clients have acute needs that can be addressed with new expertise, but the long-term business development success of any combination hinges on sustained integration efforts and a focus on how strengths of each firm can foster continuous improvement in a way that makes the experience better for the client."

Building One Firm, Together

A merger's success isn't defined by new logos, office locations, or expanded practice areas—it's defined by its people. Go beyond the

announcements, and offer a clear and simple playbook for how your teams can help co-lead the integration into a successful future. Internal relationships are the glue that holds a firm together, enabling it to deliver on the promise of greater scale, deeper expertise, and enhanced client service.

Think about it: a merger is like stepping into uncharted territory, a new world where the familiar meets the unfamiliar. It's a chance to shape not only the structure of a firm but the way people relate and collaborate.

Manton explains, "Building trust requires intentional investment and commitment to fostering a culture centered on a shared and inclusive vision. It also depends on robust systems and structures that facilitate the exchange of information and knowledge—key elements to driving meaningful collaboration."

When leaders prioritize internal relationship-building with the same intentionality as business development, they unlock the potential for transformation. This isn't just about surviving change; it's about thriving through it. So, whether your firm is going through a merger or simply navigating change, ask yourself: What can I do today to build the trust and relationships that will positively shape my firm's future?

Rudhir Krishtel *practiced law as an Am Law 100 partner and senior counsel at Apple. He now speaks, facilitates and coaches regularly with high-performing teams and individuals, serving as a resource and support for workplace communities. He can be reached at connect@krishtel.com. For more information on business development, effective communication and relationship building in the workplace, visit [krishtel.com](https://www.krishtel.com).*

NOT FOR REPRINT

© 2025 ALM Global, LLC, All Rights Reserved. Request academic re-use from www.copyright.com. All other uses, submit a request to asset-and-logo-licensing@alm.com. For more information visit [Asset & Logo Licensing](https://www.alm.com/asset-and-logo-licensing).
