

Perkins Coie LLP

Ellen Conedera Dial – Partner

Ellen Conedera Dial is a partner with Perkins Coie LLP, where she focuses her practice on all aspects of real estate development and financing, including acquisitions and dispositions, leasing, land use and zoning.

Outside of the firm Ms. Dial serves in a number of professional and civic activities. She was recently announced as president-elect of the Washington State Bar Association. She has also received professional recognition for her achievements and contributions to the legal community. Her accolades include being named as one of the *Best Lawyers in America* for 2005-2006 and *Chambers USA*, "America's Leading Business Lawyers," (2003-2005). She also received the Washington State Bar Association Award of Merit in 2004.

Ms. Dial graduated with an AB, magna cum laude, from Cornell University in 1968 and earned her JD, magna cum laude, in 1977 from Cornell Law School. Prior to joining the firm, she served as a law clerk for Washington State Supreme Court Justice Charles Horowitz from 1977 to 1979.



Q&A with Ellen Conedera Dial

What advice would you give a young woman considering a career in the law today?

Law has become a field that is open to women creating their ideal careers. However, women should choose carefully both their areas of practice and the organizations with which they practice. The key is to find a balance between career and the rest of their lives. The choice of the field of law, as well as the environment in which a woman is working—whether it's in-house counsel, private firm, or working for a governmental organization, for example—will have implications for how much control and flexibility she's going to have over her work schedule.

What kind of steps have law firms and other legal employers taken in the last few years to create a better working environment for women? What else do you think needs to happen in this area?

My law firm has been implementing family-friendly policies for a long time. The key is flexibility. For example, the ability to work from home when necessary is just one tool to help women balance the demands of work and family. Some practices offer more flexibility than others, and some projects—such as a large transaction or a trial—may make more demands than others. Women should be conscious of those things when they decide where they're going to start their careers and what sort of expertise they want to develop, keeping in mind their own goals for balance and flexibility.

Fortunately, firms today are more attuned to the need for options, and the options that work best change over time. What works one month or one year may not work the next month or the next year. Examples of tools that offer flexibility are part-time positions, non-partner-track positions that make fewer demands for client development, and temporary leaves of absence. Women may opt to use one or more of these approaches at various times during their careers. These are the kinds of tools that lawyers can ask of their firms and expect to have reasonable policies in place.

As far as what else needs to happen to improve the working environment for women, I would say the single most important area would be better mentoring. Mentoring is incredibly important to the success of every lawyer. There are lots of examples of mentoring environments for men in the history of this profession. It's been much more difficult for women to find effective mentoring. In part, that's because historically there have been fewer women. Also, women who have been pursuing their careers have had to work awfully hard to be successful and haven't always had the emotional energy, or sometimes even the awareness, that it's important to mentor someone who is more junior. Mentoring involves developing an attitude, a way of thinking, which brings others along. We have to institutionalize mentoring in every legal environment. We have to make it as much a part of our jobs as lawyers to mentor other lawyers coming up as it is to pursue our own success.

What impact has a career in law had on your personal and family life? Do you have any special techniques, methods and philosophies to help you maintain a work/life balance and be a successful lawyer?

I did not go to law school until after I had my children. My children were in school when I started practicing law. I did not have to deal with the challenges of having infants and toddlers at the same time that I was trying to work a regular office schedule. But I always put in long hours. The greatest impact was that both my family and I learned to be very flexible and to make changes quickly. Being flexible was important for making the most of the opportunities for a rich family life and still allow me to pursue my career. You have to work around the various demands, whether that means working at home after the kids are in bed or trading off on who's going to the soccer game. It requires constant attention to what the goals are and keeping those goals in mind.

In Seattle, where I practice, we hear a lot about balance from both women and men who are entering the profession today. My firm offers alternatives and approaches to help people keep that balance as their careers develop. Nothing ever stays the same for five minutes. You have to be prepared to make changes. It's been my experience that law firms are recognizing that it's in their best interest and in the attorney's best interest to allow for this type of flexibility.

What other careers and life choices did you consider before deciding on a career in the law?

I had [a] five-year hiatus between my undergraduate degree and the time I started law school. I did some graduate work in theology after college and considered getting a degree in theology. For part of that time my husband and I lived in Germany, where he was pursuing his doctorate. While we lived abroad, I was not pursuing any course of study. I considered careers in literature or psychology (my undergraduate major was English, and minor was psychology). I come from a family of musicians, and I also considered a career in music. So I had a number of things to think about!

I began to think about the law as a profession while we were living in Germany. This was 1970, not all that long after WWII. The people we got to know in Germany were still very aware of the impact the war had on their country. It was interesting to me to see what was happening in the United States from the perspective of living abroad for an extended period of time. What I recognized was that social change was being debated, discussed, supported and implemented through the law. I became interested in the law as an element of how our culture and society work.

After we returned to the U.S., I took the LSAT. I didn't prepare; I took it almost as a test to see if the law seemed like a possible career for me. I decided to do my first year of law school and see if I liked it. As it turned out, I enjoyed it enormously. My undergraduate degree in English, combined with my natural propensity for careful textual analysis, made law school very interesting and engaging for me. I was one of those few people who actually enjoyed law school. In fact, by the time I graduated, I intended to pursue a career teaching the law. But I was encouraged to be a law clerk first because it would enhance my credentials for teaching.

After law school, I came to Washington for a clerkship with the Washington State Supreme Court. I clerked for a wonderful judge who had practiced law for 40 years before going on the bench. He was a real mentor to me and I am very grateful for the guidance and support that he gave to me. He encouraged me to try practicing law. Even though my intention was to teach,

I began practicing law at the judge's urging. I found that I enjoyed it very much. I often say to people that if you don't enjoy practicing law, then don't do it. Don't choose to do something professionally you don't like, because it's going to be a horrible waste of your talent and time.

If you were not practicing law and you could not be a lawyer, what would your dream career be now?

I ask myself that a lot because I'm not too far away from retirement age. That fact is phenomenal in and of itself—a practicing woman lawyer who's not too far away from retirement age. There aren't that many of us. I'm interested in many things and there are a lot of things that I could imagine doing and enjoying. My career has been as a real estate lawyer. I could easily imagine becoming involved in a big real estate project. I could imagine teaching. I could imagine writing. I've done a lot of volunteer work and I could imagine spending time working with nonprofits and using the skills I have acquired as a lawyer in that arena. But I think that what I would really want to do would be to combine a number of things, rather than do any one thing.

How do you expect the practice of law will change in the next ten years?

In the private law firm world, there is a push toward mergers. The economics of the business are such that general practice firms have a lot of pressure to get bigger and to have a broader scope of services that they can offer to clients in more places.

Also, technology will continue to change the way we do business on a daily basis. This will continue to have an enormous effect on how we practice law, particularly on how things get done (electronically instead of on paper), and how we access information. Very few lawyers spend time in the library anymore. We get information from a broader range of sources than we did previously, a huge proportion of which are electronic. These changes will allow lawyers greater flexibility.

I also think there will be a real sea change in what lawyers are. Historically, lawyers in the United States have been predominately white males. That's not going to continue to be the case. We are going to have much greater diversity in all aspects of our legal system. That's very healthy for the future of the profession. Law firms and law-related organizations of all kinds will come closer to reflecting the culture in which we operate. That, in turn, will have a huge positive effect on the way we look at the law and the way law is practiced.