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A New Era in Legal Alliances: Cohen Vaughan's Innovative Partnership Model

Introduction: A Game-Changing Legal Collaboration

In a bold move that reflects evolving strategies within the legal industry, two law firms announced the formation of a new partnership on Monday. The collaboration, while not a full merger, signals a shift in how firms seek to leverage combined strengths while maintaining individual operations.

Philadelphia-based Vaughan McLean and Buffalo's Cohen Cunningham DeRose Higgins Lyon have joined forces to create a civil defense practice under the name Cohen Vaughan. This innovative approach allows the firms to practice as one entity while preserving key aspects of their separate infrastructures.

Why Not a Full Merger?

Richard Cohen, chairman and chief development officer of Cohen Vaughan, explained the rationale behind this unconventional partnership. "There are some philosophical and logistical differences that would have been hard to reconcile in a conventional merger," Cohen said. "But the synergies and opportunities were too significant to ignore, so we chose to move forward with this flexible structure."

Joseph Vaughan, founder and managing partner of Vaughan McLean and now president of Cohen Vaughan, echoed this sentiment. "We're living in both worlds for now. Delaying action to address every detail would mean missing out on valuable opportunities."

The Structure of Cohen Vaughan

The newly formed entity will operate as a single legal practice, boasting 18 offices and 75 attorneys. Its headquarters will be in Philadelphia, with a centralized back-office center in Buffalo. While Vaughan McLean and Cohen Cunningham will continue to exist as separate entities for administrative purposes—managing distinct 401(k) plans, compensation systems, and recruitment strategies—Cohen Vaughan will deliver unified legal services to its clients.

The firm projects a conservative first-year revenue of $30 million, a figure that reflects confidence in the partnership's potential.

The Benefits of Non-Merger Alliances

Kristin Stark, a consultant with Fairfax Associates, highlighted the growing appeal of such alliances. "These partnerships offer many benefits of a full merger without the complications of integrating legacy systems or assuming financial liabilities," Stark said. However, she noted that alliances require careful balance to prevent uneven contributions or expertise gaps between firms.

Stark added that alliances can sometimes serve as precursors to full mergers. "It's like a first dance. Building trust and relationships can pave the way for deeper integration in the future."

A Broader Trend in Legal Partnerships

The concept of non-merger collaborations is gaining traction across the legal industry. For instance, earlier this year, Greenspoon Marder and Davidoff Hutcher & Citron announced a referral partnership. This arrangement allows the firms to exchange client work without merging, enabling them to explore synergies while retaining independence.

Greenspoon Marder's co-managing director, Gerald Greenspoon, described the partnership as a practical alternative to a merger. "This structure provides a reliable way to collaborate while avoiding the complexities of a full combination," Greenspoon said. "A merger might be possible in the future, but it's not the immediate goal."

The Merger Landscape

Despite the rise of non-merger alliances, traditional mergers remain a cornerstone of growth for many law firms. Over the past two years, approximately 50 mergers were completed annually, according to Fairfax Associates. Eleven combinations have already been announced or finalized in 2025, including high-profile mergers such as Troutman Pepper's union with Locke Lord and Ballard Spahr's tie-up with Lane Powell.

Cohen Vaughan's Vision and Challenges

Richard Cohen brings extensive experience to the partnership. Having founded Goldberg Segalla in 2001, a firm that grew to more than 450 attorneys across 23 offices, Cohen's leadership credentials are well-established. He left Goldberg Segalla in 2021 and later formed Cohen Cunningham DeRose Higgins Lyon with lawyers from various prominent firms.

Cohen acknowledged that maintaining separate compensation systems for now could present challenges. However, he emphasized that this approach minimizes disruption and allows both firms to retain their distinct identities. "Over time, our compensation platforms will likely align more closely, perhaps even merge completely," Cohen said.

Conclusion: A Forward-Thinking Approach

Cohen Vaughan's innovative partnership exemplifies how law firms can adapt to changing market dynamics. By blending the strengths of two established entities while maintaining operational flexibility, the firm is poised to seize new opportunities in the competitive legal landscape.