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Michael Cantor (left) and Phil Colburn have built Hartford's Cantor Colburn LLP into one of the country's largest IP law firms.

## As industry consolidates, Hartford's Cantor Colburn steadily becomes one of nation's largest IP law firms

By Joe Cooper  
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**W**hen Hartford law firm Cantor Colburn LLP replaced Fox 61's tower signage at the Stilts Building a decade ago, staff commemorated the occasion with a grand unveiling and champagne toast.

The celebration not only marked the firm's downtown debut, but also underscored its ascent from a small intellectual property boutique law firm to one of the

country's largest and most productive legal patent and trademark outfits.

"We thought it was a big deal to have a sign on a high-rise," co-managing partner

Michael Cantor joked in his 22nd-floor corner office at 20 Church St. "We even have a book commemorating it."

Today, the independently owned IP law firm still has the hands-on approach of a small boutique with the capacity of an industry-leading patent legal practice employing more than 100 attorneys and 300 total staffers across offices in Hartford, Washington, D.C., Detroit, Atlanta, Houston and South Korea. That's a significantly bigger operation compared to the firm's three-attorney practice in the 1990s.

Cantor and co-Managing Partner Phil

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Colburn at the time had big decisions to make amid industry consolidation and the high-tech boom, while also succeeding the firm's senior partners. Together, they opted for an aggressive growth strategy to try to become a global brand working with clients of all sizes.

"At that time when we got into this field the best firms were in [Washington] D.C., New York City, San Francisco and Boston," said Cantor, who is married to West Hartford Mayor Shari Cantor.

Steady growth in the last two-plus decades has transformed Cantor Colburn into one of the largest of more than 1,000 patent law firms nationally, both in terms of the number of patent attorneys and patents issued annually, the partners say.

Cantor Colburn provides patent and trademark services for a large portfolio of corporate giants in varying industries, including United Technologies Corp., Ferrari, Samsung, NBC Universal, Disney and Fox. It also serves clients as small as West Hartford gunmaker Colt to as big as Israel's Teva Pharmaceutical, one of the world's largest pharmaceutical companies.

The firm's legal know-how in 2019 helped clients obtain thousands of utility and design patents and trademark registrations, ranking in the top 11 nationally in all three categories, according to annual rankings by Denver's Oppedahl Patent Law Firm.

Cantor and Colburn say the business has especially benefited from low overhead costs being headquartered in Hartford, home to two-thirds of its attorneys and most of its backroom operations.

"We are an example of how you can not just exist in Hartford as a company, but thrive and grow, because the fact is, Boston and New York are so much more expensive to do business in," said Cantor, who is a major Hartford promoter, sitting on the boards of Connecticut Innovations and the Greater Hartford Arts Council. "There is also a quality of life in the suburbs here that many of our attorneys love. We have really grown using Hartford as part of that."

### Fearless mindset

Cantor and Colburn say they never envisioned the more than 50-year-old firm growing to its current stature. But they both agreed years ago they needed to grow quickly to surpass general law practices that had been beefing up their IP departments.

The partners spent most of the 1990s

## Cantor Colburn's 2019 Scorecard

Cantor Colburn LLP helped clients obtain the following number of U.S. patents/trademarks last year.

Category	Patents issued	U.S. ranking
Utility patents	4,418	3
Design patents	327	6
Trademark registrations	443	11

Source: Oppedahl Patent Law Firm LLC

"lawyering," handling everything from patent and trademark work to litigation and licensing. They also began to attend and participate in more international conferences and public-speaking engagements in countries like Korea and Japan as they grew their IP portfolio both in the U.S. and abroad.

"You can never stop doing those things, you can lose a client tomorrow," Cantor said. "We felt burdened to bring in a new, nice vision of a global company that will make [attorneys and clients] stay and be happy."

As more clients rolled in, so did new hires. The firm at the time began to aggressively hire attorneys with mechanical, electrical and software engineering degrees, and developed specialized groups that manage all of those practice areas and more.

They also built a C-suite by hiring a CFO and creating various departments for finance and human resources.

"Demands grew and we grew to serve the client's demand," Colburn said. "Our philosophy has always been to service clients providing quality work at responsible pricing."

While the firm has capitalized on many of its growth initiatives, expansion has come with a few hiccups for Cantor, who joined the firm in the early 1980s, and Colburn, hired nearly a decade later.

In 1999, the partners launched the firm's second overall office, in Norwalk, hoping to woo patent attorneys from New York City law firms.

The venture was short-lived and the location was shuttered in 2002.

A year earlier, the partners were looking to open a second office in Detroit, but those plans were delayed for months due to an air travel shutdown following the terrorism attacks on Sept. 11. (They actually scheduled flights that day from Bradley International Airport to Detroit, but never departed.)

Then came the 2008-2010 recession.

Although an economic crisis never arrives at a good time, Cantor Colburn had just made a major investment in becoming

the anchor tenant at the Stilts Building, 20 Church St. (It had previous locations in Bloomfield and Windsor, and has always been based in Greater Hartford.)

Uncertainty in the financial markets also encouraged more industry consolidation, creating even larger competitors in the IP law field.

But Cantor and Colburn maintained an "entrepreneurial spirit" in the years before and after the recession, and added offices in Atlanta, Washington, D.C., Houston and Seoul, South Korea.

The partners have also aimed to make an impact outside of the office: Cantor has been an adjunct patent law professor at UConn for 20-plus years and Colburn previously taught at Western New England Law School.

"I think the biggest thing about Phil and I is that we were never scared of failing," Cantor said. "We have done some things that have not worked and we are not scared of that. I think the way you grow in this world is to not be scared of failure."

### Client's perspective

Cantor Colburn's small-business roots are still apparent today in how it maintains relationships with clients like specialty-engineered materials company Rogers Corp.

The Arizona-based manufacturer of electronic materials, previously headquartered in Killingly, was one of Cantor's first clients more than 30 years ago.

Cantor Colburn leads Rogers through the years-long, patent-filing process for most of its manufactured products, including materials found in hand-held electronics, telecommunications infrastructure and power modules and converters used in automobiles.

Shawn Williams, Rogers' vice president of research and development, says Cantor still makes himself available for regular meetings with the company to review its U.S. patent portfolio.

During Williams' first seven years at Rogers, Cantor Colburn has helped the company file more than 100 "family applications," each containing about five patents, he said.

"Cantor gives us a lot of personal attention," he said. "Not only do we benefit from the quality of claims we are drafting, we get guidance on how to build and protect the portfolio. For us, we feel the quality, diversity of their backgrounds in their patent attorneys are of great benefit to Rogers."