

Why a Longtime Weil Litigator Is Now the Firm's First Chief Wellness Officer

After 30 years working as a litigator at Weil, Lori Pines is winding down her practice to serve in a rare C-level role for employee wellness.

By Patrick Smith
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What You Need to Know

- Lori Pines, a 30-year veteran litigator at Weil, is now the firm's first chief wellness officer.
- Pines is one of the few chief wellness officers in Big Law.
- She said one of the biggest obstacles she will need to overcome is convincing attorneys that they are not superhuman and that they should be paying attention to wellness issues.

Lori Pines, who has spent her entire 30-year legal tenure as a litigator for Weil, Gotshal & Manges, is taking her career in Big Law in another direction. A longtime wellness advocate (she has a degree from the Duke IM Integrative Health Coach Professional Training Program and is also a certified corporate wellness specialist), Pines is taking on a position that few large law firms have in place: a C-level role dedicated to employee wellness.

While many firms have long maintained wellness programs (think free meditation sessions, gym discounts and the occasional webinar on eating better), not very many have allowed their programs to have the proverbial "seat at the table" and serve at the same level as chief financial, marketing or information technology officers.

Law.com spoke with Pines about her decision to transition into the chief wellness officer role, what obstacles exist in providing law firm employees with effective wellness training, getting buy-in from clients, and whether she thinks other firms will follow suit.

Editors note: The below text has been lightly edited for clarity and brevity.



Lori Pines of Weil.

Courtesy photo.

What are the largest obstacles in the legal community to achieving a high level of engagement and understanding around wellness? How do you combat those?

There are certainly some obstacles. Many lawyers think they are superhuman and can handle anything and resist making time for wellness. Many fail to understand wellness is not just a nicety, but a necessity. Especially at law firms. Our products are our people. We have to be well in order to serve them well. We can combat this by educating the community about the importance of well-being and by getting buy-in from clients that care about these issues. Many of them do. We need to impart that it is a critical business issue. We want [lawyers and staff] to be healthy because we care about them, but also because it increases productivity, retention and decreases healthcare costs in the long run.

It comes down to education. They [attorneys and business professionals at law firms] need to understand the long-term implications of not taking the time for wellness. Understanding that is an important issue for the business. I think education is the best way to encourage firms to pay attention. And hearing that firms are taking it seriously is important to many clients.

How did this new role at Weil, chief wellness officer, come about?

In 2019, I approached (Weil executive partner and chair of the firm's management committee) Barry Wolf and (Weil executive director) David Strumeyer to address health and wellness issues at the firm. Although our firm was doing many great things on the wellness front, such as benefits programs and an on-site health center in the New York office, I thought we could do more to coordinate and broaden those efforts around wellness. David and Barry were enthusiastic about it, and we formed the health and wellness committee, which David co-chairs with me.

From the onset, the committee was very busy. Since the pandemic hit, the committee's mission to extend wellness to the whole Weil family became even more important. Our leaders understood in these unprecedented times, a comprehensive well-being program in the workplace is crucial. But it is something that requires full-time resources and genuine commitment. The firm embraced the chief wellness officer role, and the fact that a partner was given that role shows how serious they are.

Our intention is to foster physical, intellectual, environmental, occupational, mental, emotional, financial, spiritual and social well-being. I am really excited about continuing to enhance the well-being program in the years to come.

It wasn't that long ago that most firms didn't have a CMO or, more recently, a chief diversity officer. Will most firms benefit from having this sort of wellness position? How so?

I think they could certainly benefit. Some law firms have become large, global business entities with hundred or sometimes thousands of employees. Lawyers who practice full-time don't have the time to also manage the business. Good businesses have C-level executives who are dedicated to key areas of growth, retention, success and making sure the business cares for its people as it should.

I do think more law firms will adopt this (the concept of a chief wellness officer). It is so important, and if anything the pandemic has made people accurately aware of health issues. With that said, there will be a movement toward a stronger focus on these issues. Having a dedicated position such as a CWO is a way to do that.

Will you continue to practice law in this new role? If not, what will you miss most about your litigation practice?

The chief wellness officer is a full-time, C-level position within the firm. I will consult on a few matters for long-standing clients and will remain part of client development and serve as a firm resource in areas of my expertise. What I will miss in the day-to-day is managing and being a member of litigation teams and experiencing the ups and downs of cases together. The case teams I have been on over the years have enjoyed great camaraderie and I will miss those team interactions.

Your educational background shows you have a long-running interest in mental and physical health. Where did this come from?

I have always been interested in health-related issues. I was a biology major in college and studied public health policy in graduate school. That actually led me to law school. I was a summer associate at Weil, felt at home there and never left. I litigated healthcare cases for a decade and have always been an active mentor and teacher and chaired our litigation training department for years. I also got involved on committees on women's and children's health at New York Presbyterian Hospital and have helped many colleagues, friends and family members obtain medical care. When I was chair of the New York Bar Association's Women in the Legal Profession Committee, I saw a need in this area. Over the years, more and more of my mentees and colleagues were coming to me for issues that were fundamentally related to health and well-being. As a result, I thought it would be a good idea to obtain specific training in health and wellness coaching and received a certification from the Duke IM health coach professional training program. I enjoyed that very much. Now I am pursuing mental health first aid training. Your health is your wealth. I think COVID made even younger people think about their well-being.