



This article was originally published on [www.theglasshammer.com](http://www.theglasshammer.com)

## **Voice of Experience: Susan C. Frunzi, Partner, Schulte Roth & Zabel LLP**



I didn't have a master plan or a clear vision of my career path," explained Frunzi. "Instead I went with my gut instincts, I focused on the things I liked to do, and I knew that no decision I made was irrevocable."

Following her instinct has been one of the most important lessons that Frunzi has learned and applied to her career. "Coming out of law school, I did not follow everyone who was chasing big firms. I had a hunch about Schulte Roth & Zabel—which was a smaller firm with about 50 lawyers at the time—and I felt like it was the right fit for me," Frunzi said.

"If anyone told me that thirty years later I would still be here, I might have told them they were crazy, but I have enjoyed being part of the growth of this firm and couldn't imagine myself anywhere else," she added. Today, Schulte Roth & Zabel is an AmLaw 100 law firm with 375 attorneys and offices in New York, Washington, D.C. and London.

### **Career Path**

While in college, Frunzi weighed the options of attending either business or law school, and ultimately enrolled in law school at Columbia University. "If you go to business school, you can do a lot of things, but you can't be a lawyer, and if you go to law school, you can choose to be a lawyer or work in business," said Frunzi. After she started law school, Frunzi applied to business school at Columbia, and was accepted.

After her first year of law school, Frunzi worked at a large law firm and concentrated on antitrust and trade regulation because of her background in Economics. "Although I enjoyed it and learned a lot, I realized very quickly that I was not very passionate about this particular area of law," noted Frunzi.

Frunzi came to Schulte Roth & Zabel in the summer following her second year of law school and had the opportunity to explore several different areas in order to determine which path she wanted to pursue. She explained, “What I love about trusts and estates is that I get to help individuals. This adds a different layer of complexity and can be challenging at times, but every day is different, the issues are extremely interesting, and I like and respect the people I work with.”

“What more could I ask for?” added Frunzi. Frunzi indicates that there remains a gender leadership gap (though not at Schulte Roth & Zabel) in trusts and estates, an area in big law firms that tends to attract women. “I feel especially proud of the fact that I made partner eight years into my career, even though the cards might have been stacked against me at other firms,” stated Frunzi.

Currently, Frunzi helps a lot of individuals with different aspects of charitable planning, including creating and administering private foundations. According to Frunzi, it is very rewarding to help people negotiate the terms of substantial charitable gifts. “It is always interesting to see how the institution is viewing the gift versus how the client is viewing the gift, and finding the middle ground can be a challenge,” Frunzi noted.

Another issue Frunzi is interested in, and is very much involved with, is determining how trusts are administered among multiple generations within a family. “My role changes depending on whether I am representing a beneficiary or a trustee,” said Frunzi, “and often times I have to figure out how to navigate the family issues in addition to the standard legal issues that arise.”

Working closely with families on these personal matters is one the most interesting and complicated aspects of this area, said Frunzi, who noted that learning how to handle family dynamics is definitely something that comes with experience.

Throughout her career, Frunzi has always taken a lot of pride in developing the future talent at her firm. “Looking back at all of the help and guidance I had as a junior lawyer, I try to give back as much as I can,” said Frunzi, who feels a great sense of accomplishment from watching junior associates grow and mature in their career.

## **Women’s Leadership in Law**

“It is a little different in trusts and estates,” remarked Frunzi, “and there are certainly plusses and minuses to being a woman in this area.” She noted that in her experience, she has encountered clients who only want to deal with a woman because they feel like a woman will be more inclined to understand the emotional side of the situation. On the other hand, some clients only want to work with men because they feel like men are more capable of handling the business aspects of the field.

“There are still many meetings I am in where I am the only woman, but this works to my advantage because I can offer a different perspective,” said Frunzi. The cases in this field go beyond being purely a business deal, according to Frunzi, and you need to be able to recognize the personal dynamics happening at the same time.

Although Frunzi feels that women bring a lot to the table in trusts and estates cases, she does think there are still barriers present. “An aggressive woman is perceived as being disruptive whereas men who act boldly are labeled as ‘go-getters,’” noted Frunzi. While Frunzi has never felt any discrimination at her firm, she has definitely felt judged differently than men by other lawyers and even clients on occasion.

She continued, “There is this delicate balance where women need to find their voice and learn how to express it and be respected in the same way that a man would.”

### **Advice for Young Lawyers**

According to Frunzi, it is important to enter law school with the right mindset. “Some people go to law school for the lack of a better option without fully understanding what it means to be a lawyer,” she said. Frunzi advises law students and young lawyers to really take the time to explore which areas they like as opposed to diving headfirst into a field they may not be passionate about just because it is popular. “You can always change your direction,” she noted. “You should never have to sacrifice your happiness in order to stay within your comfort zone.”

Frunzi underscored the benefit of finding a mentor early on in your career and learn as much as you can from them. “View it as a give and take,” said Frunzi. “I owe a lot to my mentor, who helped me more than any other person in my career, but in return I have worked unbelievably hard and given so much back to my firm.”

She encourages her peers to continue to mentor women and invest in future talent so that women continue to be well represented in leadership roles in her field, and in the legal profession in general. “In trusts and estates, you often see all male partners and mostly female associates,” said Frunzi, “and the only way this will begin to change is if we mentor young women and advocate for them in their career advancement.”

You have to take a step back every now and then to look at yourself and your career with a wide-angle lens, said Frunzi. She recommends asking, “Do you have a mentor? Do you have people that you enjoy working with and respect professionally? Are you interested in the work you are doing?” If you don’t have these things, then you should consider revisiting your options, said Frunzi.

## **Outside the Office**

When Frunzi is not in the office, she prioritizes family time with her husband and 12 year old daughter. “We enjoy playing board games and catching up on episodes of Modern Family together,” she said. “It is a fun way for us to bond as a family,” she added. Frunzi is also looking forward to an upcoming safari trip with her family this summer.

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