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# Labor Secrets

California's under-the-radar  
employment lawyers

*Susan Roos,  
Cook, Roos,  
Wilbur, Thompson*

# Labor Secrets

A look at some top employment lawyers who work under the radar

By **Scott Graham**

**A**sk anyone who's the best trial lawyer or the best IP litigator in California, and you'll probably hear the names of well-known, \$700-per-hour senior rainmakers at California's largest law firms.

But there are a great many superb lawyers practicing outside the headlines at smaller firms all over the state or in more junior positions at the megafirms. They may not have the same name recognition — but they also don't usually come with the same price tag.

To come up with the names of some hidden gems among outside employment lawyers, we surveyed in-house counsel at large, medium and small companies all over the state. We took their recommendations and cross-checked them with mediators and plaintiff attorneys who specialize in employment law.

The result: a select list of four attorneys — two in San Diego (at the same firm, no less), one in Los Angeles and one in San Francisco. All four began at big firms before striking out on their own. We don't mean to suggest that these are the only great lower-profile attorneys who are practicing employment law in California. No doubt there are many others. But we're nonetheless pleased to identify a few who may be flying under the radar.

**S**usan Roos elicits the ultimate compliment from an in-house

attorney: She should charge more for her services.

"Her rates are incredibly reasonable," says John "Rick" Runkel, former general counsel at VISX, an eye-surgery technology company. "Susie and her staff rewrote our employee guidelines and manuals and handled a series of employment issues at a fraction of the cost I would have expected from a large-firm lawyer. I actually told her she needs to raise her rates." Runkel may be slightly biased since the two worked together many years ago at Sheppard, Mullin, Richter & Hampton.

But a mediator and a plaintiff attorney who have seen Roos in action and talked about her in exchange for anonymity, vouch for her skills. "She's got a very good book of business," says the mediator. "She's a good lawyer — assertive, hardworking, focused." "She's aggressive and she knows what she's doing," says the plaintiff attorney. "She can be pushy, which is not necessarily a bad thing. Essentially I think she's reasonable in the end." The plaintiff attorney's assessment is echoed by Runkel. "If necessary, she can play hardball with the best of them, but she strives to incorporate the rule of reason into her advice," he says.

Roos is a partner at San Francisco's Cook & Roos, which has recently been undergoing a transformation. Partner John Cook is taking of counsel status and the firm is adding Morgan, Lewis & Bockius of counsel

Tracy Thompson. The firm will now be known as Cook Roos Wilbur & Thompson. Although the firm numbers only seven attorneys, it represents some very large clients: Lockheed Martin, Gap Inc., 3Com, Mervyn's and Micron Technology, among others. It also does labor and employment work for international law firms Baker & McKenzie (post-Rena Weeks) and White & Case.

How does Cook & Roos beat out the big firms? "Our rates are lower," says Roos. "They get a more experienced lawyer at a reduced rate."

Roos, who is married to Wilson Sonsini CEO John Roos, also touts her firm's team approach. She often consults with other lawyers in her firm — and, as a member of the international Worklaw Network, sometimes with employment lawyers from all over the country. But she says she never bills that time.

And as for being an occasional hardball player? "Obviously, I want to represent my clients as best as I can," she says. "At the same time, I don't want to pick fights, have discovery disputes. I like at the end of the case to be friends with the person on the other side. Sometimes that happens and sometimes it doesn't." As for Runkel's advice on raising her billing rates, "I try to raise my rates every January," says Roos, sounding only slightly exasperated. "I'm way below where people in my class are but I still believe I have a healthy billable rate. I think we're really reasonable compared to our competition. ♦"

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