

The Patent Lawyer

GLOBAL REACH, LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

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The Patent Lawyer Editorial Board looks back at 2023 to summarize key cases and developments by jurisdiction.

Double (patenting) trouble: tackling obviousness Page 13

One IPO Transformation Page 16

Navigating the quantum leap Page 24

Litigation at the UPC Page 36

Annual 2024

Women in IP Leadership

Celebrating achievements and continuing
the empowerment of women



This segment is dedicated to women working in the IP industry, providing a platform to share real accounts from rising women around the globe. In these interviews we will be discussing experiences, celebrating milestones and achievements, and putting forward ideas for advancing equality and diversity.

By providing a platform to share personal experiences we aim to continue the empowerment of women in the world of IP.



If you would like the opportunity to share your experiences with *Women in IP Leadership*, would like to nominate an individual to be involved, or would like to learn more about sponsorship, please contact our Editor.

Maria Boicova-Wynants: Partner, Starks

An interview: inspirations, experiences, and ideas for equality.

Maria is an IP lawyer and strategy consultant empowering SMEs to sustain their competitive edge. Currently a partner at Starks, an IP and International trade law boutique in Ghent, Belgium, she also spearheads her own strategy consulting practice. With nearly two decades of experience, Maria is a Latvian Patent and Trademark Attorney, European Trademark and Design Attorney, and European Mediator in civil and commercial cross-border disputes. Her expertise encompasses IP strategy, contractual relations, and alternative dispute resolution. Holding an MBA from Vlerick Business School and LL.M. (MIPLM) from CEIPI/ University of Strasbourg, Maria currently serves as the Chair of the Committee for Quality in IP Management at I3PM, lectures at CEIPI, and contributes to ECTA's SME Task force.

What inspired your career?

It all started with a school thesis project. I was drawn into this incredible concept called know-how, something I read about in a business journal. The more I dug into it, the more I realized I was falling head over heels for the entire realm of IP. That initial curiosity turned into a burning passion that has guided every step of my career.

Fast forward to 2004, a year that turned my passion into action. I snagged an opportunity to work as a summer intern at an IP law firm. That's where I got my first taste of the real deal – the practical applications of IP law. Let me tell you, that experience wasn't just eye-opening; it was soul-stirring. It deepened my love for the field and showed me the endless possibilities and challenges it holds.

You want to know what truly inspires me about IP? It's the fact that it's alive, always changing and evolving. It's not just a set of rules; it's a force that

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fuels innovation, a powerhouse driving economic growth, and a guardian of creativity.

How have you found the pathway to your current position? And can you offer advice from your experience?

My career so far has been quite the adventure. I started in law in Latvia, reaching to Senior Associate position, then moved to Belgium, got myself an MBA, tried my hand at strategy consulting, and even delved into the world of risk management before landing where I am now.



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It's like they say, the best way to eat an elephant is one bite at a time. And the best way to get somewhere is to keep moving forward, one small step at a time.

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But through all these twists and turns, there was one thing that never left my side – my love for IP. It was like this guiding light that I just couldn't resist, something I found a way to bring into every role I took on.

Looking back, I've had the opportunity to explore various aspects of IP, whether it was within a law firm, consulting, or academia. Currently, I hold the position of European Trademark Attorney and partner in a Belgian law firm, drawing from a diverse range of these experiences. My journey has allowed me to develop a unique perspective – a blend of legal expertise, strategic thinking, and a global understanding of intellectual property.

If I am to give a piece of advice – I'd say, stay curious about the world around you! While intellectual property is amazing on its own, I'd tell anyone looking to make it big in this field to broaden their horizons. Get a deeper understanding of the business world. Trust me, it'll help you serve your clients better, give you a bigger picture, and let you come up with even more well-rounded solutions. Keep exploring, keep growing! It's a never-ending journey!

What challenges have you faced? And how have you overcome them?

It has been quite a rollercoaster. I've faced my fair share of challenges, but you know what's always pulled me through? Good old-fashioned determination and a strong support system.

I started in the IP world when I was pretty young and was met with quite some skepticism, partly because of my age and also because of my gender. But I didn't let that stop me, not for a second. I took on the challenge of juggling work and studies, and let me tell you, it demanded a boatload of perseverance over many, many years.

One key thing I learned along the way is the power of having a solid support system. Emotional support from people who truly believed in me, and practical support in the form of opportunities that came my way – I cherished every bit of it. You see, opportunities have this funny way of showing up when you actively go looking for them, even if you've had your fair share of setbacks. I've certainly had mine, from not getting into that first law firm I applied to (or even the second) to dealing with a pretty lengthy hospitalization during my university studies (and a whole bunch more in between). Then came the dream of pursuing an MBA, and oh boy, the financial hurdles seemed daunting.

Here's the thing – where there's a will, there's a way. I went all out, applying for every scholarship under the sun. I snagged one!

It's like they say, the best way to eat an elephant is one bite at a time. And the best way to get somewhere is to keep moving forward,

one small step at a time, but consistently and persistently.

But what really made all the difference was this: I have always had (and still have) this unwavering chorus of 'you can do it; we believe in you' echoing from my husband, my mom, friends, and colleagues. They have always provided the emotional scaffolding that helped me conquer every challenge that came my way. And that, in my opinion, is the real secret to overcoming anything life throws at you – the belief and support of those who stand by your side.

What would you consider to be your greatest achievement in your career so far?

When I was 23 years old, I undertook the challenge of passing the qualifying examination for a Latvian patent attorney – a feat that hadn't been accomplished in Latvia for several years before me. I vividly remember the paralyzing fear I felt when I signed up for the exam, but... despite the daunting odds, I passed, becoming not only the youngest person to achieve this qualification in Latvia but also the first one in a long time. What allowed this to happen was – again – being always in search of opportunities, coupled with the unwavering support I received. My mom, believing in me with all her heart, and the managing partner of the law firm where I worked demonstrated incredible understanding and support as I juggled intense work hours and evening university classes... their belief in my abilities and encouragement helped me surmount the challenges, proving that with determination and a strong support network, even the most formidable obstacles can be overcome.

Yet, you know what's an even more remarkable achievement to me? It's not the certificates, the medals, or the fancy titles I earned. It's not the recognition I received.

No, the most profound achievement for me is this: I found my true professional passion. I discovered a field that sets my soul on fire, and I have the chance to keep growing in it. This, right here, is my heart's calling, and every day I get to live it. It's amazing!

What are your future career aspirations? And how will you work to achieve them?

In a nutshell, my career aspirations are all about diving further into exciting opportunities that let me use what I know, my skills, and my passion to make a real impact.

I'm super keen on shaping IP policy. I might not know the exact position that'll get me there, but I truly believe that as we move forward, the right path unfolds. And you can bet on it, I'm always moving forward!

Mediation is another realm where I see boundless potential for myself to further grow. I've been

honing my mediation skills and weaving its principles into my professional journey for well over a decade now. And I am absolutely certain that the inherent qualities of empathy and active listening (qualities often associated with women, by the way), are the secret sauce in this field. It's like we have this superpower to bridge gaps and bring harmony! But I'm not stopping there. I want to take this passion of mine even further and be the spark that ignites the fire in other women in the world of IP. I want them to see what's possible and join me on this incredible journey.

But even that's not all!

Another one of my big dreams is to breathe new life into my side gig of executive coaching, mentoring, and training. I see oceans of potential here, especially in uplifting young women. That could be the niche direction I dive into headfirst. You see, I am a die-hard believer in the magic of mentorship and unwavering support. And I am fully committed to paying it forward by guiding and empowering women. Not just in IP! We're talking about entrepreneurs, activists, scientists, you name it. I'm driven by this unshakeable belief that women are reservoirs of incredible strength and untapped potential, and more often than not, all they need is someone who believes in them and gives a hand.

Remember that support system I talked about earlier? Well, I'm lucky to have it, but I also know how to build it, and I am itching to share that knowledge to help others rise and shine!

What changes would you like to see in the IP industry regarding equality and diversity in the next five years?

In my ideal world, I want to see equality and diversity not as just fancy words we throw around, but at the heart of everything we do in our professional lives. Imagine a future where we not only offer empowerment and emotional support but actively encourage it. It's about realizing that our unique qualities aren't hurdles; they're hidden superpowers just waiting to be unleashed.

I'm all about this vision where every single voice, no matter the gender, race, or background, isn't just acknowledged but celebrated. Our differences? They should be our secret weapon, giving us fresh perspectives and making our problem-solving skills unbeatable.

And oh, I dream of a world where mentorship isn't just a checkbox but a genuine commitment to guiding the next generation. Imagine: initiatives that tear down barriers, making sure everyone, especially those who haven't had much representation before, has a fair shot in our field.

That's the future I'm hustling for – a future where our differences aren't just accepted, they're our biggest source of strength and innovation!

How do you think the empowerment of women can be continued and expanded in the IP sector?

First off, let's talk education. We can open up so many doors for young women by offering scholarships, sponsorships, and mentorship programs. Imagine giving them the tools and guidance they need to truly shine! Plus, we can spread the word about the amazing things women in IP are achieving. I'm talking big campaigns that inspire girls to think, 'Hey, I can do that too!'

Mentorship is huge. We can create these fantastic mentorship programs within companies and the broader IP community: experienced female mentors teaming up with newcomers. A safe space where they can share knowledge, talk about challenges, and make some really important connections.

Oh, and flexible work arrangements! They make a world of difference. Let's not just talk remote work and flexible hours, let's go for it – the whole deal. It means women can juggle their professional and personal lives without feeling like they're constantly stretched thin.

And then there's leadership training. We can offer tailored programs that give women the skills they need, things like negotiation, strategic thinking, and decision-making. And hey, why stop there? Let's support their continuous learning, making sure they're always at the top of their game. With these steps, we're not just talking about empowering women in IP. We're making it happen, creating a future where every woman in this field feels strong, capable, and ready to take on the world!

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Sandra Pohlman: Co-founder and Partner, df-mp

An interview: inspirations, experiences, and ideas for equality.

Sandra Pohlman is co-founder and partner of df-mp. She heads the firm's large and diversified biotechnology and pharmaceuticals practice group together with Dr. Dörries. A main part of her practice is oppositions and prosecution before the European Patent Office, where she has consistently obtained favorable results for her clients. Additionally, Sandra is qualified to practice before the Unified Patent Court (UPC), the German courts, and is a registered US Patent Attorney.

She has served as lead counsel in notable opposition cases relating to patents for blockbuster drugs and groundbreaking technologies including, more recently, Tecfidera®, Tysabri®, and attacking and defending CRISPR patents. In IAM 1000: The World's Leading Patent Practitioners 2013-2023, Sandra was recommended for her expertise in patent prosecution and invalidity actions including the following comments about her skills: "She displays a matchless knowledge of her law, her writing is brilliant, and she is hugely responsive", and: "She can handle high-pressure briefs with a cool head and is the first choice for North American law firms".

What inspired your career?

My mother inspired me to become a patent attorney. She worked at a patent law firm in New York as a paralegal, so I was confronted with this career at a young age and I pretty much knew I wanted to be a patent attorney when I went to college at 18 – which people thought was very strange! With the path already in mind I decided to study first biology and then law.

How have you found the pathway to your current position? And can you offer advice from your experience?

The pathway to my current position was, I think, unconventional because I actually started out as a US patent attorney but for most of my career I have lived and practiced in Germany. I'm from the US and I undertook my entire education, including law school, there. I met my husband in my final year at The George Washington University Law School in Washington D.C., we spent a few years in D.C. where I worked as an associate at the patent law firm of Finnegan

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Henderson, and then we decided to move to Germany just for a couple of years. We liked it so much that we stayed. With some experience in the US, I was hired at a law firm in Munich and worked there, met my partners and then we founded our firm in 2000. In the meantime – obviously – I had to qualify to practice in Europe, so it was not the traditional way of getting to this position!

In the way of advice, I would offer a few things: for patent law, I do think it's quite important to have a very solid technical background – and I'm saying that as somebody who has a Bachelor of Science degree and not a Master's or PhD. Not to put myself down, but I think that in the meantime, since I left education and started my career, so much has happened and I see that it's very necessary to have a very high level of education on the technical side – that is, at least, if you're going to work in the biotech or pharmaceutical space. And then on the other hand, I think if you want to become a patent attorney you should understand that it's actually a legal job – it's really not a technical job, so the skills that you need to have are those of a lawyer. You need to combine a good technical background with the skill set of a lawyer, which means excellent writing skills, excellent communication skills, and also being able to work under pressure. That has a lot to do with being a lawyer too! If you have that in you, it's a very good career path. I love this combination of elements – it doesn't get boring, I'm always learning new things, so it's a job I could recommend!

What challenges have you faced? And how have you overcome them?

Certainly the challenge of qualifying in US and Europe! Having a few years of litigation experience in the US under my belt working at a well-known firm, I then came to Europe with – from the point of view of other people – not so much relevant experience and I had to go through the process of getting the right qualifications and the respect and the skills here. So, that was a challenge. Of course, it was a bit of a restart. I guess it's important to be flexible in life if that's something you really want to do, and that was an important lesson.

I've also started my own firm, so this was obviously challenging as a woman. At the very time of opening our firm, I was actually pregnant with my first child. The timing was so that it was either commit and do it or probably never do it at all. So, I had to make that choice and I think it worked out well despite the challenges. Of course, it's not always easy having your own firm and there's a lot of responsibility related to that but, at the same time, I have the luxury of being my own boss so to speak. In essence, my clients are my boss (and they can be pretty demanding bosses!) but being a founding partner did give me some flexibility to work my career around my family. Balancing everything was certainly the greatest challenge, but now my kids are grown and I haven't seen any issues there so I feel it all worked out!

What would you consider to be your greatest achievement in your career so far?

When I founded df-mp we were three partners, we have about 100 people working at df-mp now. Our firm has gained a reputation in, I would say, a relatively short period of time from being an unknown firm, started by three relatively young people at the time, to be a firm that's well known in the German market for patent litigation and patent prosecution in all technical fields. So, I'm very happy with that achievement, with what we managed to do together.

But being able to have my children and raise my family at the same time has been incredible, that's also a huge achievement that I'm proud of. Both of my daughters are grown up at this point – as I said, the firm's 23 years old and my oldest daughter is 23 years old, my younger is 21, so they've grown together, and I've been able to manage it. It's a balance.

What are your future career aspirations? And how will you work to achieve them?

I hope of course that my firm continues to do well. At this point, I'm starting to consider myself as one of the senior members at the firm and, while I'm not planning to end my career, it's important for me to ensure that the firm is solid with the right young partners and attorneys so that growth can continue. I'm still leading the most important cases, but I am also beginning to transition into a mentorship role to ensure all of the members in our firm are taken care of so that the firm, in turn, is taken care of. It would be great if I could contribute to df-mp being healthy and sustainable for many years to come.

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The UPC is a very important development and, having always been very involved in patent litigation, we're already involved in cases at the UPC. We would really like to become known for patent litigation for UPs, not just in Germany and at the European Patent Office, as a professional goal.

What changes would you like to see in the IP industry regarding equality and diversity in the next five years?

On the one hand, I would like to say that our firm has a lot of women, I think the life sciences area has a lot of women, and I've seen a lot of my female contemporaries moving through the ranks in many areas, also being very high up in companies or being partners in firms. But I do have to say that from what I can see – and this goes for diversity issues as well – I actually believe the US is a bit ahead of Germany in this regard. In Germany I still encounter the attitude of 'career and family don't mix', which I would like to see removed. I'm obviously a strong proponent of this, but there could still be better support for it – when I started out things were worse and much progress has been made. In Germany, there are more limited childcare options for small children, so reform in this area is still needed. I have seen a positive trend. I would say people of my generation and younger are quite open though, at least in Germany, to women moving up, to being generally more inclusive, and not really having a problem with diversity issues.

I also think it's people's attitudes as well, women included, in just believing that this can be done – it's a personal hurdle. It's a question for every single woman to answer for themselves individually and for their family, but it is possible. I'm far from the only person who has achieved this, I've got friends who aren't just in the legal area who have pursued management positions in their companies and they were able to do it – and at the same time, they did have two or three children

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who turned out lovely – but did have to put in the time and work to do it. You have to have the courage to believe that it's going to work, and the desire. You should be able to have these options and I see men of the younger generation are much more involved in taking care of the kids and taking parental leave for raising their children, which is great and was not the norm for my generation.

How do you think the empowerment of women can be continued and expanded in the IP sector?

Personally, I think it's important for women to mentor other women and I'm at that stage too where I'm thinking much more about that aspect and trying hard to make sure that talented women can move forward. So, I think it's important that women who have the experience and have overcome career hurdles can help other women do so, even if it's just answering questions and sharing experiences.

