

# ‘Entrepreneurial gene’ provides Canadian attorney unique ability to navigate series of business risks



By Brian Cox

Canadian business lawyer Neil Schwartz has the trained mind of an attorney, the bold vision of an entrepreneur, and the heart of a host.

As an entrepreneur, he has walked in his clients’ shoes. He’s experienced first-hand the challenges and risks of starting and building a new business. He knows the excitement of expansion, the burden of layoffs, and the demands of leadership in the face of an existential threat.

“I think I have a good set of experiences to draw upon in terms of what really matters and what’s really important,” Schwartz says. “All business involves taking some risk. We spend a lot of time counseling entrepreneurs and leaders of companies



Attorney Neil Schwartz with his wife, Caitlin, and their three sons — Cale, Declan, and Reid — enjoy spending time at their cottage on Lac Vert in the Outaouais region of Quebec.

about the risks they have to navigate. I’ve taken those risks. Some risks are theoretical, and some risks are real.”

In 2014, three friends approached Schwartz with a business concept. They wanted to introduce escape rooms to Ottawa. Escape rooms are an immersive theatrical experience where a group of people must work together to decipher clues and solve a series of puzzles within a set amount of time in order to “escape” the room. The escape room industry has seen explosive growth since the first one launched in 2007 and there are now thousands worldwide.

At the time, Schwartz was working as in-house counsel for Canada Post — a Crown corporation that functions as the primary postal operator in Canada. He saw his friends’ venture as a fun and interesting “side gig” that held promise, and he helped them launch the company, which they christened Escape Manor.

Any concerns about how escape rooms would be received in Ottawa were soon erased. The company “took off like a shot” and quickly had an eight-week waitlist that eventually grew to nearly three months.

In addition to his in-house counsel responsibilities at Canada Post, Schwartz began spending most of his remaining waking hours working to support Escape Manor as it expanded its leasing profile and looked to acquire local competitors. The company opened additional venues in Ottawa and the surrounding area, two locations in Saskatchewan, one in Toronto and one in Hamilton, and another in Brisbane, Australia.

“Things were moving at quite a clip,” says Schwartz. “It was an incredibly exciting time.”

After a few years, Schwartz made the decision to join Escape Manor full time. After all, the business was now fundamentally

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Neil Schwartz and his family enjoy skiing in the winter.

sound and taking on investment. Schwartz saw increasing demand and plenty of growth opportunity. And he loved the chance to combine his legal expertise with his penchant for business development.

And then the COVID-19 pandemic hit and everything came to a grinding halt. Hospitality and entertainment businesses such as Escape Manor were among the first to be shut down and the last to reopen. The pandemic was crippling.

For the next 18 months, Schwartz and his business partners worked desperately to navigate the company in “survival mode” through the unpredictable waters of the pandemic. Once he determined that the business would make it to the other side and was back on sure footing, Schwartz decided it was time to return to private practice.

He joined Mann Lawyers LLP in 2021 where he supports entrepreneurs, professionals, and organizations — big and small — in their pursuit of good governance, commercial success, and legal compliance. He helps clients with organizational planning, professional corporations, business acquisitions and sales, commercial leasing, financing, and other general business issues. He now leads the firm’s Business Law Group.

He remains an owner and director of Escape Manor, which today continues to thrive, but is no longer involved in day-to-day operations.

“The experience of surviving COVID made me a better manager and leader of people,” says Schwartz.

That Schwartz should have the “entrepreneurial gene” is perhaps not surprising. Both his grandfathers were business owners, as was his father. His maternal grandfather and grandmother emigrated to Canada from Poland after surviving World War II. His paternal grandfather started a stainless-steel manufacturing company that his father later took over and expanded.

Born and raised in Ottawa, Schwartz was an athlete in school who enjoyed baseball, soccer, basketball, and tennis. His mother was a teacher and he had two older sisters who “terrorized me appropriately.” A job he had in high school at an upscale Mediterranean restaurant sparked an interest in the hospitality industry. He enjoyed the people he worked with and the vibrant environment.

After earning a degree in Commerce from Toronto Metropolitan University in Toronto, Schwartz went on to join the Leadership Development Program at Fairmont Hotels & Resorts. He managed hotels in Toronto before transferring to Vancouver where his future wife, Caitlin, was studying medicine at the University of British Columbia.

It was when Schwartz moved into sales and marketing at Fairmont that his first interest in law was piqued. Now responsible for landing accounts, managing clients, and contracting for their business, his interaction with in-house counsel became more frequent.

“I found myself more and more interested with their analysis, with their advice and the way they counseled, and that’s what got me thinking, maybe I could do that,” he says.

He and Caitlin’s future plans involved returning to Ottawa where she could start a medical practice and they could raise a family. Fairmont was becoming more global and the prospect of being transferred every few years to far-flung cities around the world — while exciting — was not appealing.

So, Schwartz made a career change and headed off to law



Neil Schwartz and his wife, Caitlin, met in Vancouver where she was studying medicine at the University of British Columbia.

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Sunny is a beloved member of the Schwartz family.

school at the University of Ottawa, earning his juris doctorate in 2010.

As a 1L, Schwartz landed a summer job at Fraser Milner Casgrain (now Dentons), a large full-service business law firm in Toronto on Bay Street, which is the center of the city's Financial District. The firm asked him back his second year. After law school, he accepted a position in the firm's Ottawa office.

He found that much of the skill set he had developed and honed in the hospitality industry carried over into his legal practice and his relationship with clients.

"In hospitality, you spend a lot of time trying to anticipate what other people are thinking and what other people are needing," he explains. "If you can anticipate what people need, you can exceed their expectations."

The first couple of years of practice brought challenges as Schwartz learned how to analyze issues and render advice.

"There is such a gap between the awareness of a practitioner and the awareness of a student who wants to learn," he says. "What wasn't new for me because of my background was how to deal with people and how to engage with clients. I was always comfortable with that."

As he began growing his legal practice, his family grew as well. Schwartz and his wife now have three sons – Cale, Declan, and Reid – and one dog named "Sunny." The family enjoys spending time at their cottage on Lac Vert in the Outaouais region of Quebec and skiing in the winter. In 2018, Dr. Schwartz

co-founded a national nonprofit to support female physicians. Canadian Women in Medicine is dedicated to helping women in medicine thrive both professionally and personally with the aim of increasing the number of women in medical leadership roles and achieving a work environment that is safe and equitable.

Schwartz remained with Dentons for more than three years before he felt the need for a change. He wanted to make a more community-oriented impact and diversify his client base.

"I felt like I wanted to be growing something more personal to me, rather than be just a cog in someone else's machine," he says.

It was then he joined Canada Post as in-house counsel and, as luck would have it, Escape Manor.

Now at Mann Lawyers, Schwartz says the firm has "been a great fit." He welcomes the opportunity to work in a variety of sectors and appreciates the platform Mann Lawyers provides for him to connect with local business and build his brand.

"I think I'm finally doing what I had set out to do in law, which is develop a community of clients I get to know both professionally and personally," says Schwartz. "I'm a very client-focused practitioner. I want to get to know my clients. I want to understand what they're trying to achieve. I want to bring them options from an analytical point of view but also give them practical advice that delivers value."



Neil Schwartz describes his three sons – (l-r) Reid, Declan, and Cale – as "awesome and active."