



## Seattle Metro Chamber – Under Construction with Graciela Gomez Cowger

**Marilyn:** Welcome to Under Construction. I'm your host Marilyn Strickland, CEO of the Seattle Metro Chamber. In each episode, we take you behind the scenes with the people and companies shaping our evolving region. Today our guest is Graciela Gomez Cowger, CEO of law firm Schwabe, Williamson & Wyatt. Graciela, thanks so much for being with us today.

**Marilyn:** So, I always like to start with telling our audience exactly what your company does, who you are, and then just giving us some more information. So, start by telling us about the law firm. How many offices do you have? How many employees do you have? And what's your specialty?

**Graciela:** Well let's see. Schwabe, Williamson & Wyatt is a 125-year-old firm. We have a little under 400 employees total. We are in four western states: California, Oregon, Washington and now Alaska. And we have eight offices in total. I would say that our specialty? We focus on six industries that include transportation, ports and maritime, manufacturing, distribution and retail. Healthcare and life sciences, natural resources, technology and real estate. And construction.

**Marilyn:** Now your title is CEO. And that seems a little unusual for a law firm. For people who aren't familiar with it. So, can you tell us exactly what a CEO is responsible for in a law firm.

**Graciela:** Well it's a, it's a good question. And really the title is a result of a very deliberate process in which we a few years ago sought to figure out what our future looked like, what our path forward was going to look like. And in doing so we determined to set our clients at the center of everything we did. we really purposely set out to educate ourselves about the industries in which our clients operated. And we focused on six industries. We didn't want to be experts in a whole bunch of different practice groups or practice areas and be master of none.

**Graciela:** So, coming back to your question about what the CEO meant. That means that initially we went to our clients and we went to their industries and educated ourselves about their industries. That also meant that we wanted to operate more like our clients operated and be innovative. Be adaptive to the changes that are happening in our own legal industry, which are you know vast and furious at a pace that we've never seen before. Which is consistent with a whole bunch of industries not just the legal industry. But the title really was a result of, of that process. A very deliberate process putting our clients at the center of it and operating like our clients operate with the need to move quickly. To change. To provide innovative legal solutions that reflect where our clients are operating and the challenges that they face.

**Marilyn:** Right. And I think sometimes people forget that law firms are businesses as well.

**Graciela:** That's exactly right.

**Marilyn:** And so, you know you have your target audience. You have your customers. You think about where you want to specialize. And so it's very similar to how people run businesses.

**Graciela:** That's right.

**Marilyn:** So, let's switch over and talk about you. I read that you were born and raised in Mexico and grew up in Tijuana. So, tell us a bit about your childhood and your journey.

**Graciela:** Well I was born in actually an adjacent town about 120 miles to the east of Tijuana in a town called Mexicali in the middle of the desert Which essentially means that it's 120 degrees in the shade in the summer. And we went back to visit often because my paternal grandmother still and, and my aunt still live there. We moved to Tijuana when I was about three. So that's my hometown.

**Marilyn:** Right.

**Graciela:** It was a great place to grow up actually. We played in empty lots from dusk until dawn. We played marbles and we made elaborate tracks for cars and we were largely unsupervised and unstructured in our play. And that all seemed to work out. I can't imagine doing that with my own kids quite frankly because you know we're worried about safety and all kinds of other issues. But that was the, the childhood I had at that time.

**Marilyn:** You know it's interesting you say that because I think those of us from a very specific generation, and I consider myself Gen X, is that. You remember like you literally jump on your bike and say I'm going to go out and ride bikes and you'd come back for lunch and you'd jump back out and you come back in before the sunset. And so, you know to your point about just being able to go out there and just enjoy being a kid and having fun and not having to worry so much about your safety every single second of every day.

**Graciela:** No and we you know, we were called into dinner.

**Marilyn:** Right.

**Graciela:** And so everybody dispersed when you were called back in. And then the next morning it all began at some point in mid-morning is what I recall. It was very fun and safe and, and all of that kind of thing. I remember feeling quite free to explore. And explore we did. Sometimes to our detriment frankly.

**Marilyn:** It happens. But just the natural curiosity that kids have. And just having the ability to just you know, check things out and have fun. So I know that after you graduated from high school you actually came to the U.S. and you ended up in San Diego. So talk about the journey from Mexico to the U.S. and why San Diego and what was it like? I mean what do you recall when you were a high schooler who moved here.

**Graciela:** Well San Diego as a city of course is adjacent to Tijuana. It's a continuous metropolitan area. So I had been and visited to San Diego before and it was a city I was familiar with certainly. I never lived there. And although it's one continuous metropolitan city as I mentioned, there are two very distinct cultures there.

**Graciela:** So when I determined that I wanted to study engineering I determined that the best place to study engineering was in the U.S. and not in Mexico. And so I, I applied to San Diego State and I got accepted. And I attended San Diego State. It helped that my cousin also, my cousin who lived in Calexico, California, had also applied to San Diego State. And so we both moved in together and started a process where she's like a sister to me. We lived together throughout college and then beyond that. Until she went back to her hometown. Although they're right there, the culture is completely different.

**Graciela:** I know now that what I was going through was sort of this acculturation process right. But you don't know it when you're, when you're late teens, you don't even know who you are. You're very self-conscious and very insecure.

**Graciela:** And then I plucked myself into a place where I was even more insecure. I didn't know who I was at that point. And then of course although I knew how to speak and write and read in English I, this is the first time I had experience learning in English.

**Graciela:** Right. And so it was a process. Where you have to take in information in English. And then of course I translated it into Spanish in my head. And what that does is it's just overload. I think I've talked about it before.

**Marilyn:** You called it cognitive overload.

**Graciela:** I call it cognitive overload. It was just exhausting, right. And, and you know still to this day when I get angry, I get angry in Spanish. I don't get angry in English. It's just a harder language or a better language to get angry in I think. For a long time I would count in Spanish. I don't do that anymore. And some of those kinds of things have now disappeared. I don't consciously or subconsciously do that translating anymore but I did at the time. And for a long time I would do that.

**Marilyn:** Well you know it's interesting. You talked about the translation and you know talk about, we do have an immigrant population here in the U.S. And people come from all over the world. And talk about how people who are co-workers or teachers, or even business leaders can help people navigate that transition. I mean, what would you like to see people do to help people navigate that transition? If there's anything they can do.

**Graciela:** Well I think that understanding, kindness, certainly patience of course overall. It's difficult to come into a country where you're perfectly able to communicate in a language other than the one that you're being asked to communicate in. And yet you have to adapt and you have to try. And I think that the U.S. is a country that could be better about accepting folks that this is not their first language. And to be kinder and patient when you're listening to. If you go to a whole bunch of countries in this world you will find that they will be patient with you.

**Marilyn:** Right.

**Graciela:** And yet we don't offer the same kind of kindness to others. Or patience to others.

**Marilyn:** It's interesting. My mother is Korean and I was born in Seoul. And I remember even when I was growing up, you know my mother had her, her accent. And to your point about how people

would respond to her, how they would treat her and even in some cases, how they would turn the volume up to 10 when they were talking to her because they thought that speaking more loudly somehow would translate. We both know that, you know immigrant experiences are not monolithic. Everyone has a very different experience. But you know one of the things that you hear us talk about in the U.S. is the whole idea of comprehensive immigration reform. I think we've been talking about it for at least two decades now. A few presidents. As an attorney and as a person who has experienced it, why do you think it is so hard for us to pass comprehensive immigration reform in this country?

**Graciela:** Oh boy. That's a loaded question right?

**Graciela:** Immigration reform or immigration is a very complex issue that involves economic, legal and security issues. And yet we are a country that often takes in information in 30 second sound bites. We are not a country who requires of ourselves and of our leaders a complex solution to a complex problem.

**Marilyn:** Nuance.

**Graciela:** We don't want nuance. We want a 30 second sound bite. I think it's frankly intellectually lazy of us to do that. I think that you need to. We need to be better. We need to know that it is a nuanced issue and that it is complex. Everybody I think pretty much that I speak to. Even in my, in our, in my immigrant community, we all want secure borders. We want security in our communities and our borders and our country. So no one, no one dares to, to suggest that that's not what we want. But I think that thinking that we are one group that votes the same in a political party kind of way. Or that had the same experience is not accurate in terms of the Latino population. I can tell you that the, the Cuban American refugees in Miami are different from the Latinos that inhabited and populated New Mexico for example. Many, many, many generations ago. And are different from perhaps some of the Latino farmworkers that are produced in California. So all of those communities have very different issues and requirements. And we should look at that. And we should understand what those are. In a way that is engaging in the community. I think that, in order to grow as a country we need foreign labor. It just is. I think that open societies do better than closed societies.

**Marilyn:** They are more innovative. They have more entrepreneurs. They have stronger education systems. That is that's a fact.

**Graciela:** That's a fact. And I think that as we close off opportunities for others to come into this country and contribute, we also close off ourselves to possibilities.

**Graciela:** We make smaller the, the realm of possibilities and the realm of people that can help us with the solutions to these very big problems that we have.

**Marilyn:** That's so true. So let's talk about your career trajectory. And I know that you spoke at an event last fall. The women in business and leadership symposium and I had an opportunity to interview you. you started out in engineering and then you switched to law school. So let's talk about how you chose engineering as a profession and then what made you shift over to the legal profession.

**Graciela:** Well let's see. Engineering was you know, I was one of those high school or pre-high

school students even, that had really mapped out my whole trajectory. I knew what high school I was going to go to. I knew what career I was going to have in my mind's eye. I knew what that looked like. I was determined. And as the mother of high schoolers currently, I can tell you that that's not the case for everybody. But I was one of those people.

**Marilyn:** Everyone's path is not linear.

**Graciela:** No. I was, but I was determined. So I went to high school graduated enrolled in San Diego State. Go Aztecs. And graduated with a great GPA and was able to find a job at what was then one of the most innovative high-tech companies around.

**Graciela:** That was Hewlett Packard Company. It was quite the accomplishment to get a job there and work there as an engineer. And I really appreciated the opportunity and certainly the help I got from others when I was there.

**Marilyn:** In a very male dominated profession and not a lot of minority representation.

**Graciela:** No. And you know we all have our stories and I have mine too. And they're unfortunate but they're you know, in a way it has been my path right? And so to the extent that that path has made me more resilient and stronger, I wouldn't trade it for anything. I'm glad that things are changing though. I hope that they are. But certainly, I picked a path that was difficult. It turns out that I did not know what an engineer did. It turns out that I was wrong. I didn't particularly enjoy my chosen career that I had imagined in my mind's eye.

**Marilyn:** What did you think an engineer did?

**Graciela:** Dealt with a lot of math and science and certainly that's true. But on a more practical level it's applied science. It's, it's about fixing things. It's about having a passion to find solutions to complicated issues. And, and certainly that you know in a higher abstraction, I really appreciate it. I appreciate what the analysis capabilities that that taught me. But it wasn't for me.

**Graciela:** All I could see around me was people that were devoted. Passionate about engineering. And after five, six years in the profession, I found that I was not one of them. And after having devoted myself to that profession for not just through college but through a few years, it's kind of a realization you know? You're wrong. So what are you going to do about it?

**Marilyn:** And a lot of people don't make that switch. They just stay there.

**Graciela:** They stay there. And I wanted a little bit more. I wanted. And really not, you know there was no, I had no money. As a matter of fact when I made that decision I had just paid off my car. So I was just then in the black. And then all of a sudden the prospect of leaving a profession that was paying me good money.

**Marilyn:** Right.

**Graciela:** Was a difficult solution or a difficult point in my life. But I had the very good support of my family and my mom and my dad. And, and my mom and dad just said do it.

**Graciela:** Why not. What could go wrong?

**Marilyn:** Right.

**Graciela:** Well a whole bunch of things could go wrong as it turns out. But the reality was that I could come back to engineering if I wanted to. I didn't know that then.

**Marilyn:** Right.

**Graciela:** And of course now my mom says, if I would have known then that it meant that you would move to the Northwest and never come back, I would have not been so generous in suggesting that you do that.

**Graciela:** But and so it was. I think I switched to the law actually just like I started engineering, not really knowing what lawyers do. Because there were none around me. My parents didn't go to college. I was the first.

**Marilyn:** Did you know a lot of lawyers? Did you have friends who were law students?

**Graciela:** None.

**Marilyn:** Interesting.

**Graciela:** None. So I knew Perry Mason. Which is ridiculous. It's insane to think that that's why I went to law school. But that and other things. I was just searching. And I think that I see a younger generation also searching for passion and mission. And I think you have to try different things until you find the one that clicks. And it turns out the law was an excellent path for me.

**Marilyn:** What do you like best about working in the legal field?

**Graciela:** I have to say that the complexity of the problems. The layered complexity of the problems that face our clients. And helping them achieve. Partnering with our clients to, to fix their, their issues. Sometimes they're in crisis. And you could aid them. So the complexity I'd say. It's a challenging profession. No question.

**Marilyn:** So I want to get back to your law firm, Schwabe, Williamson & Wyatt. And let's talk about the culture of your organization. Because as CEO, you know a lot of us who've been in the workforce for a while understand that you can have a job with the perfect job description. But who you're surrounded by and the culture of the organization really has a huge impact on how you feel about coming to work every day. So talk about as CEO the type of culture you try to cultivate at your firm.

**Graciela:** Well, interesting question. So I just have to say this. At Schwabe, we're very proud of our culture. It turns out when I started this job, I started to try to understand what that culture was. I'm relatively new to Schwabe. I started at Schwabe when my prior firm merged with Schwabe in 2015. So when I was selected for this position in 2017, a little less than two years after I joined Schwabe, I started to try to understand better what Schwabe's culture was. Because we touted it so much. And so one of the efforts that we did almost immediately was to measure what our culture was, what our current culture is and what our desired future culture was. And it's been a fascinating experience. So you know, you get to learn what people value, what people want in their culture.

And then now, where we're at is having done all that initial measurement and then we did as we did a survey, we did small sided meetings, we've done a whole bunch of initial work. Now the question is, how do we move from a to b? From our current state to our future desired state where it doesn't match up.

**Graciela:** Right. If our current state is not your future desired state. And most companies have some room to improve, as does Schwabe. How do we move from that place and how do we implement changes that allow us to move in that direction? I think it's hugely important. Culture is oftentimes, it's thought about as what I call a soft asset. It's just a nice thing to have if you have it.

**Marilyn:** It's not tangible but you can feel it. You can feel it when you walk in and how your employees feel.

**Graciela:** Yeah. And I've been persuading my partners and, and the attorneys and staff that work for us that it is more than just a soft asset. It is a hard asset. It is just as valuable to us as our clients and revenue and equipment and other kinds of assets that can form the basis for a corporation. I think that it helps you with attraction of employees. It helps you retain employees. It helps attract clients.

**Marilyn:** Indeed.

**Graciela:** Especially nowadays. And I think it's important to treat it as a hard asset and to purposely foster it and to purposely grow it and to call out those behaviors that are outside of that cultural value. And so it is with us. We are just starting to really dig in to that opportunity of knowing who we are and of determining who we want to be and of figuring out how we get to be more purposeful in moving towards that direction.

**Marilyn:** So when you talk about the direction in which you want to move and your aspirations, what would be the three words that you would want to use to describe your firm, when you reach your aspiration?

**Graciela:** Honest, fun and collaborative.

**Marilyn:** That sounds great. So do you do any pro bono work at Schwabe?

**Graciela:** Oh, we do quite a bit of it. Just to give you one example, I was just reminded a couple days ago of. We're representing an Innocence Project death row inmate in Alabama of all places. It's not even California or Oregon or Washington or Alaska, one of the states we're in.

**Graciela:** But our firm has always been part of some of that legal work here in Seattle. I know we represent Kids in Need of Defense, KIND, it's an immigrant nonprofit that we aid with and we provide legal services for that.

**Graciela:** We've worked with tenants, landlords that kind of, those kinds of conflicts and we provide legal services there too.

**Marilyn:** Interesting. So here we are in Metro Seattle. One of the epicenters of technology in the innovation economy. So can you talk about how technology has affected everything for most of us in our daily lives? You know it's affected how we shop, how we communicate, even in the

manufacturing sector. Talk about how technology has affected the legal profession in your opinion.

**Graciela:** Things are getting more and more automated. You know, the demise of the lawyer has been predicted because of robots and artificial intelligence and this kind of thing. I don't see that happening frankly. I think that lawyers have unique capabilities to engage and evaluate in a way that at least technology currently doesn't provide. But it's changed us right. It can make us more effective and more efficient in the way we, we interact with our clients. Certainly one big change in my twenty five year career is all of a sudden we have to be available 24/7.

**Marilyn:** I was going to ask you. So what are some of the upsides of technology and what are some of the challenges that come with technology.

**Graciela:** Some of the upsides are that you can work anywhere. You can, so long as you have access to the cloud or the Internet and you can. You can work from anywhere. You can work at a sandy beach if you can focus.

**Graciela:** We have oftentimes attorneys and staff that do work anywhere. If you're needing to stay home for one reason or another. To care for a sick child or whatever, you can put in some hours from home. So we allow for that. So I think that's a net positive.

**Graciela:** Less advantageous is that you have to be very purposeful in setting your boundaries. When I get home for example, late at night I will purposely leave my phone by the garage door and charge it there. So that I don't look at it you know after 8:00 or 9:00.

**Marilyn:** The addiction that we have to the Black Mirror and our devices.

**Graciela:** That's right. So I try to be purposeful in setting my own personal boundaries. But I think that's difficult and that's a challenge for all of us. Because our clients expect us to be more available to them. And we need to be responsive to them.

**Marilyn:** So I think about pop culture and how it sometimes has an impact on different professions. And so I'm going to totally date myself here. So I think about the show Bewitched and Darren Stevens was an ad guy. Then I think about Mike Brady was an architect and I think about the show L.A. Law. And so what would you say to someone today who's contemplating going to law school and getting a law degree?

**Graciela:** You know, I think it's a wonderful profession. I think you can make a real impact in people's lives and in your clients lives. In law school. And you end up with a greater perspective of how government works. How communities work. And, and how you can contribute. Even if you don't end up working as a lawyer. It gives you tremendous skills to be able to go lead a non-profit or a for profit company in a different way.

**Graciela:** I think it's a great basis. I would say that about engineering as well, as a matter of fact, even if you don't end up being an engineer like I did.

**Marilyn:** Yeah well it's interesting because a lot of people have graduated from law school and you see them in a lot of different professions. And so they don't necessarily all practice law. Do you have to have passed the bar to work in a company even if, even if you don't technically practice law?

**Graciela:** You have to. You have to be licensed and pass the state, state bar. You have to be licensed to operate to give legal advice. In most states. But you don't give legal advice in many positions.

**Marilyn:** Right. OK. So I want to now switch over to the personal part of getting to know Graciela. So what is something that people would be surprised to learn about you?

**Graciela:** I am about to become a beekeeper. So I bought my hive. I've ordered my bees. I bought a couple of books. One of them of course, Beekeeping for Dummies. Yes it does exist.

**Marilyn:** There is such a thing.

**Graciela:** There is such a thing and so I have that and I might be taking a couple classes and giddy up.

**Marilyn:** That's interesting. And I was reading something today. We've heard about this for a few years just about the bee population decreasing and how that's going to affect our food system.

**Graciela:** Absolutely. These are fascinating creatures the way the hive works. There's two castes of females. The, the Queen and, and the drones and there's one set of male bees.

**Marilyn:** There's a hierarchy.

**Graciela:** There's a hierarchy. They get kicked out if in the winter because they eat too much as matter of fact. It's a fascinating study into these, these hives and how they operate and how hardworking they are. So I'm just really excited about it. I'm saying it out loud here because y'all can hold me accountable if that doesn't happen by the end of the year. We can report on that.

**Marilyn:** You heard it here. She is going to become a beekeeper. So because you come from a legal profession you hear people say like, 'There ought to be a law.' Fill in the blank. There ought to be a law.

**Graciela:** There ought to be a law to prevent children from being separated from their parents at the border.

**Marilyn:** Amen. What's on your playlist, on your podcast, on your iTunes. What are you listening to these days?

**Graciela:** OK. Let's see playlists. Listen to a few podcasts but music wise, I actually listen to quite a bit of rap but it has to be good.

**Marilyn:** Yes.

**Graciela:** I'd engage in the likes of Eminem and Kendrick Lamar for example. I also like some of the old Latin ballads. José José, Julio Iglesias, and others. So I have kind of a wide breadth of musical preferences I guess.

**Marilyn:** That's great.

**Marilyn:** So if you're at a karaoke bar and you're asked to take the mic to sing a song, what song are you going to belt out for the audience?

**Graciela:** Oh God, I would hope no one is ever in the audience to hear me belt out any songs. And my son I think, who is very musical would agree with that statement. I would say it's got to be Imagine Dragons, Whatever It Takes.

**Marilyn:** Excellent. So, as we wrap up here, I'd like people to talk about what inspires them. So, what are your words to live by. What's your motto?

**Graciela:** Expect nothing, appreciate everything.

**Graciela:** You know. I don't think the world is fair. I don't think it's supposed to be. I don't expect it to be. But yet I'm grateful every day for the community. The lawyers. The staff that support everything we do. The kinds of impact I can make on, on folks. The young people that I meet all the time to try to, to steer and help and, and inspire. That's all gravy. It's all great. I'm absolutely grateful for all of that.

**Marilyn:** Well, thank you so much.

**Graciela:** Thank you for having me.