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Business of Law

Morgan Lewis Lawyer Uses Tech to Fuel Power of Attorneys

Silvia LeBlanc's passion for streamlining legal work has taken her on an unusual career trajectory at Morgan, Lewis & Bockius—from associate to knowledge management director.

"I don't think I ever predicted this particular path," LeBlanc said. "My knowledge management role was an organic growth from things I was doing in my own practice," LeBlanc told Bloomberg BNA Oct. 7. She started "to re-engineer how I did things" to make her labor and employment law work more efficient.

She arrived at Morgan Lewis's Philadelphia office in 2003 and after "a very long evolution," began performing knowledge management duties for the labor and employment practice group in 2008. "I came up with a plan of things I thought needed to be done in the department, and they told me to go do it," she said.

LeBlanc continued to serve as an associate for a few years, but about a year ago, she relinquished that role when she took on knowledge management for all the firm's practice groups. Morgan Lewis has more than 1,800 lawyers in 29 offices.

Practicing in a Different Way. "I'm still practicing law, but in a different way," LeBlanc said. "If you embrace the idea that the practice of law is bigger than litigating or doing deals, I think I am practicing law."

She said she feels "a responsibility to my stakeholders, who are the lawyers in the firm and their clients, to keep up with the law" so she can suggest ways that technology can streamline their workload.

"I think knowledge management needs to be lawyer-led because we know best what our pain points are."

—Silvia LeBlanc, Morgan Lewis knowledge management director

"I think knowledge management needs to be lawyer-led because we know best what our pain points are," LeBlanc said. "Just as a partner would delegate some tasks to an associate or a paralegal, there are some tasks we should delegate to technology."

Knowledge management has different applications for different practice groups. "Knowledge management has grown extraordinarily in the labor and employment space," she said, but "I think knowledge management and technology can benefit every practice." LeBlanc said she is working most closely with the firm's emerging business practice group and the mergers and acquisitions group. "Corporate business transactions is the huge next spot," she said.

“My overall goal is to take our collective scholarship to make use” of knowledge management “in every client matter,” she said. She tries to conceive of computerized tools that allow the firm’s lawyers to locate work the firm produced several years ago and update it for use in a new matter. She also tries “to automate things that are replicatable,” such as forms and checklists that can simplify how lawyers handle their cases.

LeBlanc strives for innovation. She tries to “step back” and consider ways that lawyers can use technology to save time. “There are certain tasks that technology can do better and faster than people,” LeBlanc said. An example is scouring the mass of financial documents collected as part of the due diligence process when a client is considering buying another company.

LeBlanc is a member of Bloomberg Law’s Labor and Employment Technology and Innovation Board. The board’s goal is to provide feedback that will enable Bloomberg Law to create best-in-class products and workflow tools for labor and employment lawyers.

Willingness to Use Technology. LeBlanc discounted the idea that older lawyers may be reluctant to adapt to new technology. “I don’t believe there is truly a generational divide,” she said. “I think it’s more of a personality thing than an age thing.” She said lawyers will welcome “change to make things better, to make things faster.”

Nevertheless, “there are some differences” among generations, she said, noting that younger lawyers tend to be more comfortable with social media platforms, whereas older lawyers are more accustomed to communicating through e-mail. “I think we’re moving into a post e-mail world,” she said.

LeBlanc worked with Morgan Lewis technology staffers who developed her idea for an interactive state-by-state map into the firm’s Statute Analysis Map. The map allows a lawyer to click on a topic and then lights up over states where the laws on that topic could pose difficulties for the case at hand. “It’s a very visual way of understanding your 50-state compliance,” she said. Clicking on the map also links to information that helps lawyers decide whether they or their clients should take specified steps. “It’s such a complicated web of regulations, and our client base is trying very hard to comply, but it’s getting harder and harder to keep up,” LeBlanc said.

LeBlanc was a key contributor to another map-based tool, this one available on Bloomberg Law, that helps attorneys see where new state and local labor and employment laws are emerging across the country.

The firm also has a litigation map that goes step-by-step through the process for a single plaintiff case. It’s not a true checklist, but it prompts lawyers to consider issues that may be relevant and directs them to information that may be helpful. “We help you anticipate your workflow” and “link to our library resources,” such as rules of procedure. “The litigation map is something I developed to help me practice,” LeBlanc said, noting the tech wizards have enhanced it over time.

In fact, LeBlanc doesn’t profess to be a computer whiz. “I don’t know how to code,” she said. She is learning about technology, though, so she “can start to speak both legalese and ‘techese.’” For example, she taught herself to use SharePoint, a Microsoft Corp. software product that allows team members to share calendars and documents. “I know just enough to be dangerous,” she joked.

“The technology in the legal space moves slower,” she said, noting that “the ethical obligations we have” can heighten the challenges for law firms implementing technology. “Most of the solutions that the big business world uses we can’t use because our clients expect their information to be held confidential,” LeBlanc said. “We have to do it within our own security constraints.”

Technology Can Liberate Lawyers. “People tend to think technology is a sinister force,” LeBlanc said. “I see it as the opportunity. Technology won’t replace lawyers. It allows lawyers to spend more time on the part of their cases that matter most.”

Technology gives lawyers more time for “nuancing and argument,” she said, which is “where they should be spending their time, not rewriting a motion 15 times.” Technology could liberate lawyers from some of the routine tasks so they “have fun with the practice of law again,” she said.

Morgan Lewis hasn’t developed a metric to measure whether these knowledge management tools have increased productivity. “We talk about whether we can and should do that,” LeBlanc said. “Metrics are important,” she said, but “a lot of it is intangible.”

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To encourage acceptance of technology, “I keep a very open line of communication with our attorneys,” especially the practice group leaders, LeBlanc said. She also spends a lot of time with the information technology team. The firm houses its IT staffers and lawyers “in two different buildings, and I walk between them fairly constantly,” she said.

“I try to be a bridge between the lawyers and the technologists,” LeBlanc said. “We have so much to learn from each other.” She recounted how a discussion among the technology staffers about using an “iterative process” in a software rollout made her think about ways of reorganizing a team of lawyers working on a case.

LeBlanc grew up in the Philadelphia area. Both her parents came to the U.S. from Italy, so Italian was her first language, and she still speaks it fluently. She attended Princeton University and Georgetown University Law Center.

Initially, she planned to use her law degree as a springboard to a career in government or politics. “I went to law school to help people,” she said, but after several years in Washington, “I learned that the wheels of government are really slow.”

LeBlanc Enjoys Employment Law. Therefore, LeBlanc went into private practice and “found my home in labor and employment” law. She enjoyed this practice area because “there’s always a story” in the cases.

While practicing law, she informed her employer clients “as a baseline what they have to do under the law, but many times” they chose to do more. LeBlanc said

her clients tended to be “very forward-thinking. They want their employees to be happy.”

LeBlanc has three children—ages 6, 8 and 11—and she runs two Girl Scout troops. In her spare time, she enjoys reading historical biographies.

She also travels with her family. Recently they visited Italy, where she has relatives.

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