

Law Firm Leaders: Morgan Lewis' Jami Wintz McKeon

By Aebra Coe

Law360 (August 29, 2018, 4:34 PM EDT) -- Jami Wintz McKeon has served as chair of Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP for the past four years, overseeing significant growth at the firm. Under her direction, Morgan Lewis has expanded its presence in Asia, entered new geographic regions within the U.S., and doubled practice groups such as tax and antitrust while branching out into new sectors.

Law360 spoke to McKeon recently about the challenges BigLaw firms are facing and what she thinks about everything from the billable hour to outside investment in law firms to diversity initiatives.

What keeps you up at night?

I would say our clients and our employees. I feel an enormous responsibility to be the firm our clients need us to be and make our firm a place where our lawyers and our staff can be their best.

In terms of clients, that really means anticipating the issues they might face, getting ahead of them, putting ourselves in their shoes, and providing solutions that are tailored to their problems and their needs across a wide variety of practice areas and geographies.

And for our almost 4,000 employees, it really means they're feeling connected to the firm, professionally successful, [and maintaining] their mental health and well-being, which are issues we certainly at Morgan Lewis are increasingly focusing on. So it's the people who make up our clients and our employees that I think about the most in the wee hours.

What one trait is most important for a law firm partner?

I would say the ability to build relationships. Because that applies both to developing business from clients, which is a critical part of a partners job, but it also relates to mentoring and training the next generation of lawyers, and being collaborative with each other. Law firms don't sell widgets. They have their legal services that they offer. As a partner, what you need to be able to do is build and foster



relationships.

Do you think mergers are a good way for law firms to grow? Why?

I think they can be. I think as with anything else the devil is in the details and it's all about how you do it.

Combinations have been very successful for us. We have embarked on major combinations, and we have been a much stronger firm as a result of it. But I think that is because we invest very, very, very deeply in the diligence on the front end and the integration on the back end. If you're just bolting on practices, if you're going out and buying organizations and you're not really integrating them, you're not really doing a one plus one equals five, then I don't think they're good.

Many firms have failed because of the way they approached combinations. But if you do it the right way and you are focused on what this brings to your clients, and building and maintaining a common culture, and sharing a goal of collaborating and innovating, then I think they can be very effective.

Do you think the U.S. will allow outside investment in law firms? Should it?

I don't think it should. I think there are criticisms you can make of a partnership model and I understand that, but fundamentally law is a profession even though it's also a business. And in my view, the people who are delivering the client service to the clients are the people who should be making the decisions about the law firm, and we shouldn't lose that professional aspect.

Should we do away with the billable hour?

I think there's a misperception that law firms are the ones holding onto the billable hour. But the fact is there are a lot of clients who are reluctant to price things on a project basis because of the unpredictability of the legal system and really not trusting that there is a better way to evaluate value. We've gone to clients and said, "we'll take a whole portfolio of work on an alternative fee basis," and while the idea initially appeals, there are too many people who struggle to get away from measuring things by the hour.

We were one of the first firms to offer alternative fee arrangements. We've been doing that since at least 2000 and we've had a lot of success with it. We think it gives clients predictability, it focuses on more alignment between the client and the law firm, and it can really work well. But it works well if you have excellent, efficient people who really know how to get to the heart of a problem quickly and present great solutions to the client. They have to be great counselors, people who can evaluate issues and see around corners, and then you also need clients who are interested in partnering with the law firm to make this more of an ongoing, shared relationship.

For the law firms and clients that do that right, it works beautifully, but it requires a lot of investment and it requires a really strong partnership and a lot of faith on both sides. And not everyone, either on the law firm side or the client side, is there yet.

Why hasn't the legal industry made more progress on diversity over the past decade?

There's been a great deal of focus on increasing diversity within the legal industry, and I think what we're discovering is that standalone diversity initiatives, which focus solely on numbers, really don't advance the ball. The real focus is inclusion and incorporating into every aspect of your firm life a

commitment to having broad, diverse and inclusive teams. It's really an issue of creating an environment where everyone is welcomed and has the ability to succeed.

We've been trying to focus on this in a lot of different ways. It may not surprise you that as a firm that is chaired by a woman, we are very intentional about diversity, we consider diversity when selecting our leadership. We consider peoples' real commitments to diversity when we're selecting our leadership. We want to make sure we're expanding opportunities for everyone and that we're not just looking for cookie cutters, somebody who's just like the person that had the job beforehand. We have a focus on rotating leadership — that includes formal term limits, and it also includes less formal term limits. That's really important to getting new blood in there and giving more people opportunities to lead.

I also think firms really need to be willing to commit resources. There's a lot of different ways to create a more inclusive environment. At Morgan Lewis, one of the things we're known for with our clients is we train our clients on implicit bias. We train our partners on implicit bias. A lot of law firms don't do for themselves what they do for clients, but a large part of changing the pattern and making a more diverse and inclusive environment is making sure everybody understands that every one of us brings perspectives with us that are kind of baked in. Being able to understand that and recognizing the value of change and inclusion is really important.

What are the three biggest challenges large law firms are facing right now?

I'd say, number one, consistency and brand.

When you're talking about a large law firm, especially a firm like ours that has a lot of different practices and a lot of different locations, what we're really offering our clients is a consistency of elite client service on a fully integrated platform where they can be confident we understand their industries, their business, their needs, and respond to them. From my perspective, size is a huge competitive advantage, but only if you get everything else right. So for large law firms, it's not enough just to have a lot of people or a lot of practices or be in a lot of places — what clients are expecting is a really high level of client service consistently, everywhere, on a fully integrated platform.

Number two, talent. Winning the war for talent is a major challenge. Talent is more and more scarce. Talent has more choices.

When I came out of law school you either went to a law firm or maybe the government. Now there's companies that hire right out of law school, there's more opportunities for lawyers, there's many jobs in the government. So attracting and retaining talent is a key focus for us and I think for all big law firms.

I would say value and efficiency. How can we do more for our clients while costing less? They're always facing the same budget pressures that we do. They're always looking to lower costs, they look at alternative service providers, they look at the need to leverage technology and other resources. We need to continually invest in technology. An advantage large law firms have is that they have the base to be able to make those investments.

If you could have lunch with any high-profile lawyer, alive or dead, who would it be? Why?

Alexander Hamilton. In terms of why, there are probably two whys. First, I, like probably everybody who's seen Hamilton, have been so engaged by thinking about all of the things that he and the other founders of our country accomplished. And I especially think that at this challenging time in the world,

I'd really love to know what they think of what we've done. And I'm just blown away by their foresight and what they achieved.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

--Editing by Emily Kokoll.

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