

Rising Star: Morgan Lewis' Katelyn Hilferty

By Emilie Ruscoe

Law360 (August 11, 2025, 4:00 PM EDT) -- In the months since U.S. tariff policy was remade under a new presidential administration, Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP's Katie Hilferty has worked closely with clients facing significant sudden uncertainties to help resolve their international trade compliance questions and avoid disruption to their businesses, earning her a place among the compliance attorneys under age 40 honored by Law360 as Rising Stars.

The biggest matter of her career:

Hilferty told Law360 that the biggest thing she's worked on in her career are recent tariff changes in the U.S., which have been impactful to the firm's clients and challenging to track and respond to.

The firm knew changes were coming before big tariff changes were announced in April, she said, noting that on the basis of public comments that had been made earlier, she and colleagues were proactive about writing articles and doing webinars on tariff topics.

"At the same time, I don't think industry in general was prepared for the scope of these new changes, so we've had a flood of client inquiries," Hilferty said.

A lot of times, those inquiring are on tight timelines with shipments that are set to come in shortly, "and they need advice quickly on what they can do, if anything, to mitigate the impact of the tariffs," she said.

It's also been new territory to clients in spaces including healthcare, automotive and retail, Hilferty added, noting that there were clients who were previously not subject to tariffs and now are, or were minimally subject to tariffs and now face a significant impact.

"The government has been very vocal about how they're going to increase enforcement of customs and import compliance in light of the tariffs, and that they're going to vigorously pursue any efforts to evade

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Katelyn Hilferty
Morgan Lewis & Bockius

Age: 39

Home base: Washington, D.C.

Position: Partner

Law school: George Washington University Law School

First job after law school: Associate at Morgan Lewis

the tariffs in a non-compliant way," she said.

As a result, "we've had to help companies make sure that any efforts that they're taking to mitigate the tariff impact are within the contours of what's permissible under U.S. law," which includes implementing strategies such as tariff engineering, making legitimate supply chain changes or seeking duty-free Chapter 98 tariff classifications.

"We've been helping a lot of clients to try to stay within those boundaries so that they're compliant, while also, hopefully, being able to legally mitigate the increased tariffs," she said. "It's been very complex work, but it's also very challenging and very satisfying when you find something within that complex legal scheme that can truly help people financially."

Her proudest moment as an attorney:

During her time at Morgan Lewis, Hilferty has helped organize a pro bono tax clinic with a local nonprofit called Legal Counsel for the Elderly, which supports the low income elderly population in D.C.

A couple of times a year, she said, Morgan Lewis hosts clinics where attorneys from LCE come in and train the Morgan Lewis attorneys to help LCE clients fill out certain tax paperwork and apply for the tax credit available to D.C. residents called Schedule H, which provides property tax relief to low-income homeowners and renters.

"We fill out all the paperwork, and then it goes to LCE, and they review the paperwork and submit it," Hilferty said, describing the work as "really satisfying."

"It puts everything in perspective, because this tax credit can be several thousand dollars and it makes such a huge difference in the lives of these clients," she said.

During the pandemic, Hilferty said, attorneys couldn't meet in person with LCE's clients, who are a vulnerable group health-wise. So she helped organize a remote clinic in which attorneys were trained virtually, then called clients and collected necessary information from them over the phone.

Hilferty recalled that the undertaking was "pretty challenging, not just because we had to have all the paperwork shipped to the attorneys — and then there was a storm that caused FedEx delays — so we had to work around that."

Once the team cleared those logistical hurdles, she said, they were speaking to the elderly people over the phone instead of in person, and many were reluctant to provide personal information or didn't answer the calls or experienced technical difficulties, making the experience a bit more challenging.

"But we did persevere, and the clinic was a success, and [in 2021], the D.C. office actually recognized me with our pro bono award," Hilferty said.

What motivates her:

Hilferty, a mother of three, said that her family motivates her.

"As a working parent, it's definitely more challenging, balancing your workload with your responsibilities as a mother, but for me, I want to demonstrate to my kids that you can go after the things you want to achieve if you work hard and have good support," she said.

In terms of support, Hilferty said, "I'm very lucky, because I have a very supportive husband who is an equal partner and who has made a lot of sacrifices at home to enable me to go after my goals and pursue excellence at work."

Hilferty said it's important to her to show her kids that "pursuing your passion and being committed to success can really pay off."

"Especially because I have two girls, and I want them to know that they can really pursue whatever they want to do and be successful and that they don't have to feel like they're limited [by their gender]," she said.

Why she's an international trade compliance attorney:

Hilferty said she "just kind of fell into it."

Before she went to law school, she lived in France for a year, and when she returned to the U.S. in 2009, she ended up working as a paralegal at a law firm doing international trade.

At first, Hilferty said, "the connection was that I had been in France, so I was looking for something international. But [I] just really found the work interesting and challenging, and decided almost immediately that I wanted to be an international trade compliance attorney."

Her boss at the time was an international trade partner at the firm, and Hilferty described her as "an amazing mentor."

"She encouraged me to go to law school in D.C., and then, while I was in my first year of law school, she ended up moving to Morgan Lewis, and then I worked for her in my second and third years, part-time, as a law clerk," she said. "She really supported me and helped me to go after this goal."

Hilferty also said the nature of the practice drew her to the work.

"Since the beginning, I have understood that this is never going to be a boring practice area, because right now, the economy is global, and almost every company, from small businesses to global corporations, are impacted by trade, whether it's higher in the supply chain or directly," she said. "When you're practicing international trade law, you get to know a lot of different industries and a lot of different businesses. It's something that makes me constantly challenged and interested and fulfilled."

Other notable matters she's worked on:

Before 2025, Hilferty said, the previous presidential administration was focused on forced labor issues, and she spent a lot of time going over her clients' supply chains and working on remediation.

"Any products made with forced labor are prohibited from being imported," she said, "and you can have detentions that can block the products from coming in."

In one notable example, Hilferty said, a client had a large number of shipments blocked just before Black Friday and Cyber Monday, which would have had a big impact on its revenue for that year.

"We worked very closely with them in getting those shipments released and working with customs to

help them to feel satisfied that there were no forced labor issues," she said. "It was definitely a challenging time, tensions were high, but it was also very satisfying when we ultimately got relief."

How the legal industry will change in the next 10 years:

Hilferty said she thinks AI is going to have the biggest impact on the legal industry.

It "probably already has," she added.

Hilferty noted that AI has both benefits and drawbacks: "It can make us more efficient and streamlined, but it can also generate a lot of inaccuracies."

"I can't tell you how many times I've searched for something in a search engine online, and then the top result is something that I'm like, 'That's not true! You definitely don't need a license for that,' or 'That's not subject to tariffs,' or something like that," she said.

In regard to her practice, she said some of her clients have utilized third-party tools that perform due diligence on their international counterparties to track sanctioned parties or forced labor issues.

"But sometimes those searches can be powered by AI, so they can be inaccurate, because they could be drawing on some sort of connection that's not true, so then you have to verify through manual diligence to confirm what the system is telling you," she explained.

"I think there are a lot of opportunities with AI, but also a lot of potential issues, and attorneys will have to navigate that," Hilferty said.

--As told to Emilie Ruscoe. Editing by Alyssa Miller.

Law360's Rising Stars are attorneys under 40 whose legal accomplishments belie their age. A team of Law360 editors selected the 2025 Rising Stars winners after reviewing more than 1,100 submissions. Attorneys had to be under 40 as of April 30, 2025, to be eligible for this year's award.