

## Lane Powell's President Sees Investing In Talent As Key

By Emma Cueto

*Law360 (April 8, 2021, 11:40 AM EDT)* -- After more than 140 years in the Pacific Northwest, Lane Powell PC is adapting to a shifting regional economy, new competition for talent and the wave of modernization brought on by the pandemic, and firm President Barbara Duffy tells Law360 Pulse that the way forward is to invest in the firm's people.

Duffy, who was named president of the firm in June 2019 after 10 years of leading its litigation department, said she is optimistic about the firm's future, even as it faces new competition, both from firms moving into the northwestern legal markets and from the increasing number of startups in the region.

She spoke with Law360 Pulse about the importance of investing in talent, including diverse talent; the new pressures on the northwestern legal market; and what she expects for the firm in a post-pandemic world. This interview was edited for length and clarity.



Barbara Duffy

### **What's your perspective on the legal market in the Pacific Northwest right now, and how do you see Lane Powell fitting into that picture?**

We're one of the oldest firms in the region; we've been around for 140 years. We have a very, very strong brand. We've represented some real bright-star clients in the Northwest over the years, and we see the Northwest as really building. Seattle in particular was quite hot a few years ago and attracting a whole lot of law firms wanting to move into the area. We're seeing more tech, more health care, more life and sciences companies moving into our region, and we see Seattle as just as vital as ever — and with it, it raises the tide of Portland and the surrounding areas.

We feel like the Northwest is still a very strong bet, and a place people want to be, for good reason. It's a beautiful place with great quality of life here. We're very optimistic about the future of the Pacific Northwest.

### **With that rising profile also comes increased competition. How is the firm approaching that challenge?**

When I first came on board at Lane Powell a couple years ago, we spent a lot of time getting focused on ourselves and our vision and what it is we want to be striving for. And we developed a vision that was really focused on talent, a vision of diverse and collaborative teams, where people work together and develop expertise and are devoted to maximizing value for our clients while strengthening our bonds with each other.

That certainly has been our focus as we've gone through the pandemic, to focus on talent and how best to develop our lawyers and our professional staff and get ourselves into a position of strength, to continue to invest in people, in industries, in clients, in practice areas.

So that's certainly where we view ourselves as having an advantage. We're a firm that will invest in individuals. It's not a place where you come over to our platform and just bill a lot of hours and make the firm a lot of money. Lane Powell is a place where you can come and develop a practice and develop expertise and add value to client relationships.

We view this as a two-way street. We have these remarkable legal professionals who are joining our platform and we want to give back to them and make sure that they have a path of development and can build a practice and a reputation, instead of just plugging into a monolith that already exists.

### **Is that focus on people a long-standing tradition in the firm?**

I feel it always has been, but the legal profession is becoming more modernized — and frankly many of the lawyers we've lost we've lost to tech, to small companies, to startups. That's new for us. So there's a lot of competition in our market, and it's forced us to get real focused on that as a fundamental objective: developing talent.

We go through strategic planning process objectives every year, and one of our objectives is to develop a place where people belong, where they feel like they have a path and they are part of something where they can grow. We've just given it a little more focus this year. We have a number of objectives that we're aiming for, so that we can develop leaders and strong lawyers who are devoted to the client base and bonded with the firm.

### **2020 was an unusual year, to say the least, for the legal industry. What are some of the takeaways you have from it, as a lawyer and a firm leader?**

Yeah, it's been an interesting year. It's funny, because I've always believed that law firms are a bit behind the times compared to other service industries. You look at accounting firms that were relatively quick to embrace hoteling models for offices and the like, and more remote work.

When I first came into the job, we talked about being more efficient with our space and more modern with technology. And the pandemic just really accelerated so many things. I feel like as a profession and certainly as a firm, we just learned so much about ourselves. We learned how, frankly, efficient we can be. We've become less dependent on travel and class AA office space — it's just not as important at the moment — and I think that's something that's going to be lasting. We as a firm and an industry are going to be investing more in talent and in tech, so that people can be more nimble in terms of how they work.

A lot of things that accelerated for us are small things, like electronic billing. We've really gotten much more efficient in terms of how we do things.

In our Portland office, we hit it right with our lease, and we're reducing our footprint by 33%. And we're excited about using Portland as a blueprint for the rest of the firm and making an environment that is really inviting. We think one of our challenges after the pandemic is getting people back to the office. So our opportunity in Portland is to create a space that people really want to come back to because it's modern, because the collaboration spaces are perfect for bringing a team together.

We live in areas where the commutes can be tough — and particularly in Seattle, our property rates are increasing at almost the highest rate in the nation, so it's hard to afford a house in the city. So a lot of people live outside the city and have these hellacious commutes, and this has been wonderful, to not spend an hour a day or two hours a day in a bus or a traffic jam. We think this will be something that makes us better. We're not doing hoteling in Portland — we're doing a hybrid model — but our focus is on those collaboration spaces.

**Do you expect that emphasis on remote work and hybrid models will become standard in the industry?**

I do, and a lot of it is what we're hearing from our talent. We started this conversation talking about talent and making sure we are leaning towards the talent and not making them come to us. We've done a lot of surveying and asking some good questions about what people want. And the flexibility, they love it. We expect that to remain.

**You mentioned earlier the importance of diverse teams. Do you think that's something that the industry as a whole is embracing?**

I can't speak to the industry as a whole, but I do know that this is something that's really important to us, that we have a workforce that's reflective of our client base and of our communities. And it's also something that our clients really are increasingly demanding. I mentioned our strategic objectives, and this was top of the list for management. We have an entire objective that is devoted to diversity and inclusion. It's a really important part of developing our vision.

It's easy to say, but one of the things that I think we've done well in the past few years is just trying to operationalize processes that will increase our success. One of the things we're in the process of is getting our Mansfield certification. We're very optimistic that we will get Mansfield certified.

But in the meantime, 71% of our new shareholders are diverse and/or women; 36% of our equity shareholders are diverse and/or women — that's really high in the industry — 56% of our governing board are women; 55% of our practice and service and industry teams are led by women and/or diverse individuals. So we've really tried to put our metrics where our mouth is.

And another thing we do, which is subtle, is we have a compensation system that rewards sharing of work and collaboration. The currency of law firms is origination credit and good work opportunities. We have a comp system that encourages the sharing of origination credit, because it's shared by matter, not by client. It really can encourage an up-and-coming lawyer and give them some credit, give them some currency, in developing the client relationships. It's really an important factor in rounding up-and-coming lawyers, diverse lawyers and women.

We really view ourselves as partners with our clients and we want all our lawyers thinking that way. We view the manner in which we allocate credit as another tool with which to invest our lawyers in the

client relationships for the long haul.

### **Looking into the future, what are you expecting from this year, and beyond?**

We came into 2020 building on a really strong 2019, and we had some significant plans for really growing our base and growing our expertise in various areas we're known for. In 2020, while we continue to grow, it slowed our larger growth plans. And where we did grow, it was in those areas where we had an acute need — labor and employment, aviation, some private client services.

Last year what we did was just hunker down to support our people. I mentioned our vision is very talent-focused, and we never lost sight of that vision. It guided all of our decisions in 2020. We didn't go first to pay cuts. And in a law firm, our biggest cost is labor, these talented lawyers and legal professionals. That's where you can move the needle, by laying people off or cutting their pay. We didn't do that. We just really hunkered down and focused on the people who were here. And it turns out the year ended really strong for us, and we were able to reward the people who helped us get there.

Profits rose significantly from 2018 to 2019, and they rose again in 2020, so we feel really good about how we're coming into 2021. And we really would like to implement our plans about expanding our depth in certain practice areas and growing our firm and expanding our brand.

We have a very strong brand, and we plan to rise with the significance and influence of the Northwest.

--Editing by Alyssa Miller.