

Kirkland & Ellis embraces alumni—current and future

BY CLAIRE BUSHEY

Kirkland & Ellis is formalizing its alumni network to win new business and recruit law students.

The firm, one of Chicago's oldest and richest, always has maintained an informal network of attorneys who worked there as young lawyers and left before making equity partner, whether to join another law firm or go in-house at a corporate law department.

But since 2013, Chairman Jeffrey Hammes has directed the firm to expand and deepen that network with formal programs to develop lawyers' careers beyond their tenure at Kirkland.

For decades the legal profession functioned on the "up or out" credo, where firms required young lawyers to progress toward equity partnership within six to eight years or face an inglorious departure.

But the stigma of not making partner has faded as the top ranks have calcified and promotions become increasingly difficult to score. Law firms increasingly see value in their departing lawyers.

Kirkland's structured approach toward staying in touch with alumni distinguishes it from firms with similarly active networks, like Winston & Strawn, Jones Day, Latham & Watkins or Skadden Arps Slate Meagher & Flom, said Amy McCormack of Chicago legal search firm McCormack Schreiber.

"There is clearly a desire to have firm alumni move into in-house legal departments where they may be able to refer work," she said of Kirkland. But more than that, "it's a good selling point for law students to show the firm really is interested in your career development, and will, in fact, work with you to transfer to in-house positions. Everyone is not going to make partner at most of these large firms, and I think that's certainly nice to recognize."



Kirkland & Ellis litigation partner Tanya Greene (left) chats with alumna Kristin Bacchus and associate David Serna.

Chiara Wrocinski, Kirkland's senior director of legal recruiting and development, four years ago rolled out CareerLink, a service for Kirkland lawyers that offers career coaching and a playbook for online job searches.

Wrocinski, recruited from Deloitte four years ago to beef up Kirkland's career development offerings, just started planning for next year's "In-House Insider" program, a workshop series for Kirkland lawyers either considering a corporate in-house job or who wanted to build their client roster to stay on the partner track. It was piloted from December through March.

Chosen from a pool of 50, the pilot program included 32 current or former Kirkland lawyers from around the country, including five women looking to re-enter the

workforce. Over three Saturdays they heard from Kirkland lawyers who'd crossed over, including attorneys at Studio Gang Architects, Abbott Laboratories, Dollar Shave Club and Jones Lang LaSalle. They also tackled the climbing wall at Brooklyn Boulders.

The program "is benefiting the firm already, and we see that in an uptick, ironically, in retention," as lawyers feel the firm is doing more to assist them on a day-to-day basis, Wrocinski said. Re-engagement with alumni also has translated into business discussions.

There are plenty more similar opportunities. Kirkland alumni head the legal departments at Six Flags Entertainment Corporation, CF Industries, Madison Dearborn Partners, University of Chicago, Potbelly Sandwich Works, Ryerson and Sandbox Industries.

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