Navigating Big Law as a Proud LGBTQ+ Lawyer

by Ranesh Ramanathan

Ranesh Ramanathan, a partner in the Boston office of Kirkland & Ellis, describes how he determined to live his life as a proud LGBTQ+ attorney from the start of his career 25 years ago despite also being an asylee who was ethnically and racially diverse. He was mentored and supported at Kirkland and at other employers while living life authentically. He encourages attorneys to do the same, and employers to establish inclusive environments.

Hiding my sexual orientation as I entered Big Law as an associate in 1999 seemed the logical choice, especially as a racially and ethnically diverse immigrant. I am ethnically Sri Lankan, was born and raised in Singapore, moved to the US for college in 1989 and was granted asylum in the US in 1998. I had enough "difference" to overcome, why add more obstacles to fitting in? Especially in a profession where at the time there were very few openly gay attorneys and no obvious path to success for someone like me.

But I made a decision early on that if I was going to personally thrive in my legal career, I needed to do so on my own terms and commit to being my true, authentic self in the workplace—no matter the consequences.

In 2004, only about 1% of all lawyers self-identified as LGBTQ+. But according to the National Association of Law Placement's 2021 survey, that number has more than tripled to 3.67%, with 2.3% of partners now identifying as LGBTQ+, 5.3% of associates, and nearly 8.4% of summer associates.

While there have been challenges along the way, I have zero regrets about making the decision to be open about who I am from the start of my career and through my entire working life so far. I have steadily advanced at two major law firms, a major investment bank, and one of the leading private equity firms, and I have been fully and proudly out in each of those varied settings.

That may sound brave, and perhaps it was, but my success in large part is due to the backing of my employers, mentors, and peers and being in a work environment that makes LGBTQ+ attorneys feel comfortable and supported.

Carving Your Own Path

I learned quickly that for LGBTQ+ attorneys to thrive, their employers must commit to maintaining an environment where LGBTQ+ attorneys are supported in however they choose to express themselves, and are shown a credible path for career advancement.

Family make up and other personal facts are often a part of the conversation and bonding that are critical to client development. As a young lawyer, being able to not just share personal facts that revealed my sexual orientation but being able to do so on my own terms was very empowering.

I specifically remember meeting a senior client from a conservative Muslim country in person for the first time after many months of working closely on a deal, and being encouraged by the partner I was with to share as much of my personal family situation as I felt comfortable. The client was not only unfazed by me being gay but actually engaged in real conversation around the struggles of managing two careers within a relationship. This client went on to become a long-term client of mine and of the firm's.

Some attorneys might not feel comfortable being as open about their sexuality as I have been—and that's fine. Each individual needs to define their own professional story based on their own comfort levels and should have the support of their employers no matter what they choose. Having that understanding and balance is key.

Employers should not put LGBTQ+ attorneys into a box, but instead allow them the freedom to shape their own personal and professional pathways unbound by prejudice. This will ultimately benefit the individuals, the organization, and of course the clients who are receiving counsel from flourishing, confident young lawyers.

Living authentically was a major theme that was explored on a panel I moderated in celebration of National Coming Out Day on Oct. 11, 2021. This panel, which Kirkland sponsored with a major private equity firm, featured prominent LGBTQ+ attorneys and private equity professionals. One of the big takeaways was the importance of community and finding a professional home that encourages you to be your true self in order to thrive.

It Takes a Village

Another theme discussed during the panel was the important role that allies of the LGBTQ+ community have in creating and sustaining an inclusive work environment. Throughout my career, the support of mentors at the law firms, at clients, and at my other employers—both members of the LGBTQ+ community and not—has made all the difference.

I owe a large part of my success to Jonathan Lavine, Bain Capital's co-managing partner and one of my most influential mentors/sponsors from the moment I started there in Boston in 2008 right through when I left to join Kirkland in 2018. Lavine is a straight, White male but was one of my fiercest advocates and someone I felt I could trust fully. His sponsorship provided me with access to amazing opportunities, and a safe space to be my true self and to grow both personally and professionally.

I joined Bain Capital right at the beginning of the global financial crisis of 2008, mere months before the collapse of Lehman Brothers. Lavine not only personally sought my counsel as the crisis created many unique and never before imaginable issues, but he included me in senior level meetings, exposing me to other leaders of the firm and encouraging me to actively participate in discussions despite my short tenure at the firm.

Finding supporters such as this is extremely important for diverse attorneys. And it is equally if not more important that companies promote a culture where every employee, regardless of background, is willing to lift those around them up, especially across differences.

Pro Bono Work, Law School Recruiting

Fortunately for me, many of my colleagues and employers have been committed to supporting and promoting LGBTQ+ employees. At Kirkland, we are very focused on creating a culture of belonging at the firm as well as advancing LGBTQ+ rights through our pro bono work and financial sponsorships, facilitating discussions that can impact change and deepening ties within the broader community.

For example, Kirkland represented the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund and the American Military Partner Association in 2020 in working to repeal the ban on transgender U.S. military service personnel. Fifty-eight attorneys and business staff contributed over 15,000 hours of pro bono service to this litigation over the life of the matter, beginning in 2017.

I am now lucky enough to be able to effect change directly through my role as a co-chair of Kirkland's diversity and inclusion committee. One of the initiatives I'm most proud of is our annual pride retreat where Kirkland's LGBTQ+ attorneys from around the globe gather for strategic planning workshops, a client networking reception, and community building events.

This event not only provides LGBTQ+ attorneys with the ability to connect and build relationships across offices, practice areas, and the globe, but it also fosters a safe space for shared feedback and insight among our LGBTQ+ attorneys.

In addition to fostering community and support for our LGBTQ+ attorneys at the firm, Kirkland is very focused on recruiting LGBTQ+ law students from across the country. We support Pride/LGBTQ+ affinity groups at the major law schools, providing them with financial support as well as access to Kirkland lawyers to prepare them for the challenges of law school, the law firm interviewing process, and law firm work. By providing these students with strong positive role models at all seniority levels early in their education, we believe that we equip these students with the tools they need to succeed in their careers.

A lot has changed in the nearly 25 years I've been practicing law as an openly gay attorney, from increased general acceptance and open discussions on diversity, to more senior LGBTQ+ role models for the younger generation. However there are still not enough LGBTQ+ leaders or attorneys who feel they can be their full authentic selves in the workplace.

The more that firms and corporations can do to establish a truly inclusive and supportive environment, the more likely we are to see LGBTQ+ attorneys coming into their own, forging thriving legal careers, and changing the profession for the better.

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