

## Law Firm Leaders: Manatt Phelps & Phillips' Donna Wilson

By Aebra Coe

*Law360 (October 2, 2019, 11:58 AM EDT)* -- Donna Wilson took the helm of Manatt Phelps & Phillips LLP in July. Wilson brings a unique perspective to her role as the CEO and managing partner of a large law firm as a working mother, member of the LGBT community, and first-generation college graduate.

Here, Wilson chats with Law360 about her goals for the law firm, the perspective she brings to her role, and the importance of grit for law firm partners.



**Donna Wilson**  
 Manatt CEO and  
 managing partner

### **You've referred to your firm as an integrated professional services firm. Can you tell me what that means and how it's different from a traditional law firm?**

Our philosophy is that we want to be advisers to our clients and that includes not only legal advice, but also strategic business and management consulting advice. We've done that to great effect, probably greater than any other firm out there. Other firms have experimented with this hybrid model over many years, but no one has done it to the degree and the success of Manatt. Of our approximately 450 professionals across the country, around 150 consist of advisers, consultants, technologists and the like. And it's fully integrated. It's not the nonlawyers off in some satellite office. We've done it to the largest impact in health care, but we have also done this in digital media, privacy and data security, which is my group, and just hired our first nonlegal professional in our financial services business group.

### **How does that play out in a practice group? How do these professionals interact with lawyers?**

They may very well be on the same team. There can be legal issues as well as consulting issues on a given matter. I think a great example, and one I'm most close to, is in the privacy and data security area. What we do is consulting as well as incident response and litigation, but we use an interdisciplinary team with respect to each of these buckets and services. With incident response, it may be our colleague Ingrid Beierly, who is not a lawyer but spent 20 years at Visa basically developing the security standards there and enforcing them. She's on a team with lawyers and sometimes she's running the case under our supervision for privilege purposes, or she may be doing consulting for the client with respect to cybersecurity while we're looking at the intersection of the legal issues with the technology issues.

I think the point is: Early in my career, you could draw a thicker line between the various groups of professional services teams and firms. Now it really is about convergence. At my partnership retreat in June, I actually had a Venn diagram that I showed my colleagues. I said, "Here's two circles, they basically overlap each other." There's a tiny area that says solely a legal problem, a tiny area that's solely a business problem and that big convergence is most challenges our clients face.

### **How does the law firm attract and retain nonlawyer talent when partnership isn't an option?**

We have a form of an equivalency for equity partner, so that isn't an issue. Some of our biggest business generators aren't necessarily lawyers. Lawyers often think everything begins and ends with lawyers and legal issues. I think because of our unique culture here at Manatt, we really are a big tent, regardless of what area of expertise someone has, what their background is, or what they bring to the table in terms of serving client needs. As a result, there's been a level of integration here that is really pretty seamless. It results in happier professionals and happier clients.

### **What is your vision for the law firm for the next five years?**

At the end of five years, where we want to be is continuing what my predecessor Bill Quicksilver started, which is a seamless integration of legal, strategic and business advisers who — in this time of great change everywhere, in the economy and the country and the world — are able to bring their expertise to bear to proactively meet client needs.

One of the side goals — I've been in the legal services business since I was 17 and working my way through college — is that I want us to be at the point where, unlike what a lot of people believe, you don't have to be unhappy or miserable to be at a professional services firm. I think we're proof in the pudding for that. I want to continue to maintain that culture and ethos at the firm.

### **What are some ways your firm promotes that and how can others do the same?**

Part of it is a function of size. My view is that size isn't everything and, frankly, there's benefits to being more compact and nimble. Part of that is personal reach out. The way we're structured is we're structured around verticals and horizontals. We focus on our core industry sectors and we don't want to be everything to everyone. We want to do what we do best. We have groups and business group leaders and within those groups we have business units. It provides us with a leadership structure that is able to create team building that other structures may not be able to do. We're very much into being really personal with folks, with everybody knowing each other and helping each other out.

### **As a working mother and member of the LGBT community, what do you bring to the role of the leadership of the law firm that is different or unique?**

I think a lot of it is inclusion. The word "diversity" is used a lot, but it's also about being inclusive and making sure people feel engaged and that they're part of the firm and that they're important to the future of the firm. I do understand a lot of issues facing folks, whether it's balancing work and family, which I try for a good batting average. Sometimes my partner and I may whiff, but generally we do pretty well. But it takes effort and I know that.

And also I come from, probably, a much different socioeconomic background than most lawyers do, and I'm really sensitive to that. Quality of opportunity is really important to me and making sure people have it. So is trying to reach beyond what the usual suspects might be in terms of recruiting or what have you,

to bring folks in from different backgrounds. Diversity of background, whether it's racially, socioeconomically, in terms of sexual or gender orientations, brings different perspectives. And I think those perspectives will become more and more valuable as our economy changes and our industries change, given the changes our clients are facing every day that we're trying to help them with.

**What's one way young women lawyers can position themselves to become leaders?**

First and foremost, I think, is to do good work and be reliable and responsive. It's the basic blocking and tackling. You get a small task or project, you do well on it, you get a bigger one and on you go in terms of your professional development. Obviously, getting a mentor is really key. I wouldn't be where I am today in terms of my diversity and my family background had it not been for people who took the time to take me under their wing to help me and advise me. And I listened to them. That's the other piece, you have to listen to them and not reject the advice. You might ultimately disagree with it. But as I say, as I get older, my parents seem to get much smarter. There is a benefit to experience. And then, ultimately, it's about making sure you tell people what you want in a positive way in terms of what you're aspiring for. People want to hear that and I think women tend to be a little more reluctant to ask. Luckily for me I wasn't one of those people and I had a number of mentors, including my predecessor, Bill Quicksilver, who were terrific and really let me fly.

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

I would say grit and curiosity. I think grit is key to anybody's success. I tell my daughter this all the time. I always say, "You've got to be resilient." How you bounce back from adversity and manage challenges is what separates people. That's really important because life is never perfect. The other piece of it is curiosity. I think a lot of times as lawyers we're very head down, pencil up. You need to think about and be curious about the professional services firm of which you are a member, be curious about what is happening in the various industries your clients are operating in, and be curious about your clients and prospective clients. I probably spend an hour and a half to two hours a day reading. Not just Law360, but business articles and everything I can get my hands on. I can tell you, in those two hours, I get half a dozen great ideas I can bring back to the firm and my clients.

**What well-known lawyer, alive or dead, would you most like to have lunch with? Why?**

I would say it would be Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. I would sit down with her and probably not even talk about law. She's just brilliant. She's seen a lot of things over the years, confronted a lot of issues, and is incredibly witty. She provides a perspective that crosses the aisle in many respects. Anyone who can have a close relationship to somebody opposite themselves, like Justice [Antonin] Scalia, that's not just intelligence, it's also emotional intelligence and looking beyond. She's really an amazing person, justice and lawyer.

--Editing by Katherine Rautenberg.