

## Law Firm Leaders: Perkins Coie's William Malley

By Aebra Coe

*Law360 (December 4, 2019, 4:16 PM EST)* -- William Malley stepped into the role of firmwide managing partner at Perkins Coie LLP in July. The Seattle-headquartered law firm has more than 1,000 lawyers across 20 offices in the U.S., China and Taiwan, and recently opened up an intellectual property agency in China.

Here, Malley chats with Law360 about his views on secondments and sabbaticals, his plans for the law firm over the next five years, and what he believes has made the firm a go-to for top technology companies.

### What has the law firm's growth strategy been in recent years?

We've had a steady growth trajectory over the last decade or more and that's been the result of a deliberate strategy on our part, to grow from being primarily based in the Pacific Northwest to being a firm with a more broad national and international footprint. And, in more recent years, particularly since the adoption of our strategic plan in 2017, we've concentrated our growth in major markets, including New York, Washington, D.C., and the Bay Area, as well as continuing to focus growth in our headquarters office in Seattle.

### As you've grown, what methods for growth have you made use of?

We're unusual among law firms of our size in that we've grown primarily almost entirely through lateral growth and internal, organic growth rather than through mergers. The most recent merger we did was in 2004 when we acquired Brown & Bain in Phoenix, a 70-lawyer firm. Since then our growth has been through organic growth and hiring individual partners and small groups. What we realized is this form of growth can be quite effective at allowing us to bring on board partners whose practices fit our strategic needs and also fit well into our culture.

I would add as well that we've invested in building a strong lateral partner integration program and, as a result, have among the highest lateral partner retention rates in the Am Law 100.



William Malley  
Perkins Coie  
managing partner

### **What does that program involve?**

We look at lateral partner integration as a process that requires clear planning upfront and then strong execution in the two years following the lateral partner joining us. We realize that in many cases the enthusiasm and energy that exists at the time of hiring can wane if you don't put strong organizational infrastructure behind it. We make sure we sit down with the lateral partner and come up with a plan for a whole range of activities that will occur over that lateral partner's first two years with us. That includes meeting with clients, connecting to other partners in the firm, being given the opportunity to create real visibility for that partner's practice throughout the firm. Then we have a team, a lateral partner integration team, that works with that partner and practice group to help make sure the plan is executed.

### **Is the firm avoiding a merger or acquisition?**

We remain open to acquisitions and will always be willing to consider a combination where that makes sense. At the same time, what we've found is that the strategy that we have followed has been quite effective at helping our firm to continue to grow geographically, to grow in our practice mix, and to grow in our overall revenue and profitability. We've been quite confident in the strategy and intend to continue along the path, but keeping an eye open to other opportunities that may arise.

### **Your firm recently expanded in China with the addition of an IP agency. What opportunities do you see in China?**

We have a long presence in China, both in Beijing and Shanghai. What we've found is that our U.S. clients are increasingly looking to us in connection with their business operations in China, in particular in the protection of their intellectual property. As a U.S. law firm, we're not able to practice Chinese law. But we do have the opportunity to represent our clients in connection with the protection of their intellectual property in China through the establishment of the IP agency. What we're finding is that as the Chinese legal system evolves, we're able to evolve with it and widen the range of services we can provide to our clients.

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

We have a number of important goals as we look toward the future. First, we believe that it's critical to maintain a focus on the client and the client's needs. At the heart of that we think is delivering excellent client service and we do that by assembling talented teams of lawyers in areas of law that are crucial for our clients' businesses. We see those areas of law across our firm, including for example privacy and cybersecurity, intellectual property litigation, and many other areas of practice. In particular what we see is that our client base is heavily concentrated in the technology sector, including some of the most disruptive and innovative areas of our economy. What we have done and will continue to do is to combine not only legal expertise in areas that our clients need, but also to bring deep industry knowledge in the technology sector.

### **How do you do that? How do you find people and train people to be experts in the industry that they're serving?**

Our expertise and our industry knowledge evolves along with the work we do with our clients. In part, it's simply our long-standing relationships with clients. We've grown with them. We also make sure that we tie in our career development strategies to our goal of expanding our knowledge of our clients'

industries. One example of that is our increasing use of secondments where we give the opportunity for lawyers, as they're progressing through our associate ranks, to work side-by-side with our clients. We see that as a win-win both for our clients and our own lawyers. It creates opportunities for our lawyers to advance in their careers and it also adds value to our clients and deepens our knowledge of our clients' industries.

### **How is your law firm different from other BigLaw firms?**

I would point out several aspects. First, as I mentioned, we're known for our strong emphasis on the technology sector. That doesn't encompass our entire client base, but certainly we represent some of the leading technology companies in the world, from emerging companies to some of the largest in the world. That is increasingly a part of our brand and our reputation among law firms. Secondly, I'd emphasize our strong culture. It's a culture that has deep roots in the Pacific Northwest where our firm was founded. It's a culture that we think has taken root across all of our offices. It's a culture of collegiality, mutual respect, a very down-to-earth culture, and one we think binds together the lawyers and staff members across the firm.

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

Resilience is one of the most important traits. The practice of law has always been demanding and I think that's especially true today. Clients have a lot of choices. They look to their law firms to be incredibly nimble, highly responsive, and to provide highly specialized services in areas that are crucial to the client's business. To the partner, that is pretty demanding. There's no question that over the course of a career, that kind of work can place great stress on a lawyer. So, resilience is one of the most important characteristics to providing the highest quality services over the long run.

### **Is your law firm taking any proactive measures to build resilience in its attorneys?**

One of the things that we do that's unusual among firms is we provide for sabbaticals, not only for partners but also for staff members. Our sabbatical program is intended to provide the opportunity for partners to take a step back, to rest and recharge. Typically, a sabbatical would be three months in length. Many of our partners have taken more than one sabbatical over the course of a career. And each time I talk with a partner who's come back from a sabbatical, they emphasize just how valuable that time away is and how much energy and enthusiasm they bring to the practice of law following that sabbatical.

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

I'd like to have lunch with Judge Margaret McKeown. Judge McKeown is on the Ninth Circuit and she was the first woman partner at Perkins Coie. She was with the firm from 1975 until 1998 when she went on the bench. I'd like to have lunch with her to learn more about her career and about the evolution of Perkins Coie over the years. And what it was like, in her experience, to be the first woman partner at the firm.

--Editing by Katherine Rautenberg.