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4 DC Managing Partners On Their Priorities For 2022

By Justin Wise

Law360 (January 4, 2022, 12:02 PM EST) -- For the past 21 months, law firms have adapted to a new normal where remote work is commonplace. But as Washington, D.C., office leaders look ahead to 2022, some are anticipating a shift toward again making the office an attractive destination when it is safe.

The recent surge in COVID-19 cases associated with the omicron variant shows firms in the District will continue to have to navigate the effects of the pandemic this year, and some firms have pushed back their official January office reopening.

At the same time, D.C. offices are experiencing soaring demand across their corporate and regulatory practices, driving an unprecedented battle for lateral attorneys in the region. With regulatory enforcement expected to increase in the next year under the Biden administration, D.C. leaders said they want growth to remain at the top of the agenda.

But that goal also comes at a time when firms are battling attrition. As one D.C. office head said, in a landscape where firms are pressing hard to bring on more lawyers, leaders have been put in a position where, "in a sense," they need to recruit their own attorneys to keep them from leaving.

Law360 spoke with four D.C. office leaders about their priorities heading into 2022, including effectively navigating hybrid work environments and preparing for a ramp-up in federal regulatory enforcement.

Joseph Palmore, Morrison & Foerster LLP

Morrison & Foerster D.C. managing partner Joseph Palmore named both the return to office and the firm's lateral recruiting among his top priorities heading into the new year. The firm's offices reopened on a voluntary basis in October, and Palmore said that a top priority is maintaining flexibility in work arrangements while also making the office an attractive place to go.

It's a goal that Palmore says is in part linked to the intense competition for associates that has persisted for almost a year now.

"We want to continue to provide opportunities for associates to develop, to learn and to be able to get the kind of experiences that they want, because associates in this market have other options," Palmore said. "In a sense, we need to be recruiting associates not just laterally, but recruiting our own associates to make sure that they remain happy and that they're getting great opportunities at the firm so that they want to stay."

Palmore said retention goes beyond cash incentives. He noted that the firm needs to give associates opportunities like the chance to participate in important client calls and oral arguments.

"Making the office an attractive place to come to is another part of that," he added. "The new normal is flexibility in work arrangements, but I think having an office where there are opportunities to have personal interactions with more senior lawyers is another important component."

Morrison & Foerster's 140-lawyer D.C. office is coming off a big year in terms of recruiting. By early November, the office had brought on 18 lateral attorneys, including eight partners, the majority of whom came from government posts.

Palmore **previously told Law360** that much of the hiring came in response to the increasing regulatory scrutiny the firm's Big Tech clients are facing. He noted that lateral recruiting would remain a top priority in 2022, with the firm looking to add practitioners across areas like antitrust, white collar, national security, life sciences and data privacy.

"I can't say we'll add eight lateral partners [in 2022], but I'm confident we'll have multiple lateral partners that we'll be adding," he said.

Edward "Smitty" Smith, DLA Piper

DLA Piper D.C. managing partner Edward "Smitty" Smith said he has one overarching philosophy heading into 2022: "Grow, grow, grow."

Smith said he has no specific target number in mind, but he noted he's interested in building out the BigLaw firm's regulatory and government affairs practices as they prepare for more enforcement activity in the coming years.

Seventy percent of DLA Piper's regulatory and government affairs practitioners are based in D.C., according to Smith. The firm **in September** integrated those two practices under one umbrella, a move he said represents the firm "doubling down" on its investment in this space.

"We recognize that our biggest clients are in highly regulated spaces that are quickly becoming more regulated, and dealing with the government is central to their business," Smith said, adding that the trend is a core reason behind the integration and the firm's recruiting plans.

Practices in D.C. are preparing for a busy year in antitrust, white collar and government contracts, especially given the recent passage of a \$1 trillion infrastructure package in Congress, Smith said.

Smith said the firm is doing better than ever in terms of productivity and revenue, even as many attorneys have elected to work from home. Continuing to hone that hybrid model would be a top priority, he said, adding that the firm currently has no requirements on how many days an attorney must work in the office.

As a national diversity and inclusion partner at the firm, Smith also highlighted retention of associates from underrepresented groups as a continued focus. He noted that the industry typically does a "very good" job of hiring diverse classes of first-year associates, but that firms' ability to keep them remains an endemic problem.

"A lot of firms do a very good job of hiring diverse attorneys and having a good first-year class," he said. "But the third-year class starts to look a little bit less diverse, and by their fifth-year class, it doesn't look very diverse at all. And then you reach partner elevation class and people are wondering, 'Why don't we have any diverse partners we can elevate internally?'"

"The secret to making sure you've got diverse partners you're ready to elevate is working through every step of the way to make sure these excellent attorneys, who are capable and smart, that those attorneys are being given the opportunities to grow and succeed in the firm," he added.

Cynthia Richman, Gibson Dunn & Crutcher LLP

Cynthia Richman, co-partner-in-charge of Gibson Dunn's D.C. office, said in December that her top priority for 2022 is to oversee a successful formal office reopening. The firm had targeted Jan. 10 as its official return date, but recently postponed that plan amid the new wave of COVID-19 cases.

Gibson Dunn offices remain open for employees who voluntarily choose to go in, but it is unclear when the firm is pushing its official return to.

Richman said that lawyers are excited about "the opportunity to work together on a regular basis in person," but she added that a reopening will lead to "some interesting adjustments" given that many lawyers haven't been going to the office regularly since March 2020.

Richman noted that the firm plans to continue giving attorneys broad autonomy over where they work, and she said some initiatives brought on by the pandemic wouldn't go away. Richman said she and her co-partner-in-charge Thomas Dupree Jr. began meeting with associates, partners and staff on a monthly basis during the pandemic to get "our fingers on the pulse" of the office and to respond to questions or concerns.

"I don't think that's something we're going to change when we go back [to the office]," she said. "It's been really, really positive."

Richman said the D.C. office has been "flat-out busy" this year, which played a major part in its hiring of more than 30 lateral attorneys. The **partner hires** included Stephen Weissman and Michael J. Perry, both veterans of the Federal Trade Commission, and **three tax experts** from Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP, who came on board in November to launch a tax controversy and litigation practice group.

She said a top priority in the coming year would be to help get that practice up and running, in addition to ensuring all of its regulatory groups are prepared to handle more incoming work.

"We're still at the early stages of what is going to unfold" in the enforcement space, Richman said.

Looking farther into the future, Richman noted that Gibson Dunn recently signed a lease for a new D.C. office in a building set to be complete in 2024, giving her and her colleagues a chance to imagine the workplace "of the future."

"It's a fascinating exercise to be part of," she said. "That's going to be a major project over the next couple years, in terms of figuring out what our space is going to look like."

Daniel Lennon, Latham & Watkins LLP

Latham & Watkins D.C. office head Daniel Lennon also said that the return to the office is at the top of his mind heading into 2022. The way the firm works has "changed significantly," Lennon said, and he sees it as a priority to maintain some of those changes when more attorneys start heading to the office more often.

As "people think about returning to the office, it's about flexibility and how we best serve our clients in an increasingly complex environment while allowing us to maintain our culture," Lennon told Law360 in an email.

Lennon noted that the pandemic led the firm to devote more resources to both incoming attorneys and seasoned veterans navigating the "new normal" of hybrid work arrangements. He highlighted one tool the litigation team began using at the beginning of the pandemic that shows a curated roster of hearings, trials and other proceedings that attorneys can view online.

"The platform was conceived as courts across the U.S. transitioned to virtual proceedings, potentially depriving young lawyers of valuable exposure to in-court hearings and trials," he said. "It has proven to be an unprecedented opportunity for associates to virtually observe seasoned litigators in action, and later ask questions to learn directly from the lawyers involved."

As for his 2022 goals, Lennon said the office would "continue to lean on technology, but hope to encourage people to come into the office when they can and feel comfortable."

--Editing by Alanna Weissman and Ellen Johnson.