

Interview with Katherine Helm



KATHERINE HELM

Katherine Helm has been a partner at Dechert since 2018. She has a PhD in Neurobiology and Neurosciences and has clerked for judge Alvin Schall at the United States Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit and former chief judge Marilyn Hall Patel at the Northern District of California. Katherine talks to Managing IP about how lawyers can maximise their business development skills and why junior lawyers may have more connections than they think.

What core skills do lawyers need to learn to maximise their business development capabilities?

It's hard for me to talk about this topic of business development in a vacuum because everything is so focused on the current COVID-19 environment. That said, it's really important now, more than ever, to have a graceful, soft touch.

Lawyers who are most successful in business development quickly learn that they need to develop strong oral and written BD skills, and those skills should be overlaid with the ability to read a room – even when you're not in the room.

For example, with law firms putting out so much thought leadership right now, some clients are saying that they can't handle another webinar. You need to be able to sense that and satisfy the client demand. Part of that is just being sensitive.

How do you balance sensitivity with putting yourself out there?

The way to balance this with clients is the way you would with anybody.

Clients are people, and most clients are your friends, contacts and colleagues. Any relationship extends far beyond the specific matter at hand. You care about your clients, and hopefully they care about you too.

The first step is to reach out on a personal level. Just check in. Ask them how they are and how COVID-19 is impacting them. Ask them how it's impacting their family. And listen to them thoughtfully and with genuine interest.

I've done it this way because I do really care, and I want to know how they are. That's really important, and it has to be the first step.

How can lawyers maintain a work-life balance while developing their business?

This is a point that's really important to me because I care a lot about work-life balance. I have a family and I mentor associates, and I never want my associates to think that in order to be successful, you have to give up your personal life. I advise associates to make the business of their clients something they want to

care about and attend to in their free time. The best lawyers are ones who actively care with a level of intellectual curiosity about their clients. For them, that free time will include doing news searches on their clients to see if their stock went up or down and why, or to learn the biggest things their clients are doing right now that might extend beyond the particular matter they are working on.

How can lawyers best leverage relationships with business development professionals at their firm?

As law firms become bigger and more established, we have more people whose primary job is to help the business develop even further. It's a huge mistake for any lawyer to disregard business development professionals for not being directly related to what they are doing, because in my experience these people are incredibly helpful.

Usually, business development professionals in law firms have a legal background or have worked with law firms long enough that they understand how to fit in and how to add value.

For example, I have a team of people that run my LinkedIn profile. Part of their job is to do LinkedIn posts on my behalf, leverage my connections and make sure the right messages are getting out to all of my connections. This is incredibly helpful to me and there's a lot of value in maintaining my online business presence.

How should a lawyer's business development strategy evolve as he or she gains seniority at a firm?

When you're a junior lawyer, you should think of your clients as other attorneys at your firm. You can start honing your business development skills from day one, when you come in as a first-year associate. As you get more senior, your skills will grow and will help you with building a larger network of colleagues and clients.

Junior associates often think they don't have any connections, and forget they went to law school with an entire class of people who are practising attorneys. Eventually, many of those individuals choose to go in-house. If you maintain those connections, you will have in-house contacts.

Do you find that women face any particular challenges in business development? How can they navigate these challenges?

It depends. Sometimes women have a leg up in business development, and sometimes there are challenges for women or for any attorney who is different from the status quo. It takes a long time for things to change. We still have gender disparity among partners and in-house ranks throughout the legal field.

To the extent that a woman is the only woman in the room or on a call with several men, there can be certain challenges in going against the grain. At the same time, you can really use that difference to stand out and be noticed. Sometimes people speak about the stereotype of women saying something and men talking over them. I've had times when I speak up on the phone and by no means do I think I've said the most insightful thing, but because I speak in a female voice, people identify that it's me and they listen because it's different – and it can be a real booster.

To navigate the challenges, you have to accept that we don't have gender equity or gender parity among senior level ranks, whether within the firm or the company, or within the legal field in general. The best way to navigate that is to utilise it to your advantage. Some people feel that they can't speak up or can't participate until they really feel comfortable, or until there's a 50-50 gender balance. That's going to take a while, and we can't wait until that point.

Women sometimes have to be even more outspoken than men to be heard, but once their voice is heard, people will recognise that they have intelligent, smart and insightful voices, and that they are providing valuable contributions. They just have to speak up.