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Séverine Hotellier: Polycentricity sets us apart

What works in New York does not necessarily work in Baku, and we understand that, explains Dentons' Paris managing partner

How would you define your firm's culture?

Dentons is a challenger brand and we are trying to build the law firm of the future together, so it is a very exciting place to work. Our culture is extremely important to us, so we have built a unique culture around five core values: passion, foresight, collaboration, value creation, and perhaps most famously, polycentricity.

Being polycentric means we have no one global headquarters and we reflect

the diversity of our clients and of the communities in which we work and live.

What are the biggest challenges facing firms in France?

Law firms are facing many of the same challenges that many of our clients are facing. Firstly, we are seeing fierce competition, not only from other international law firms, but also from non-traditional sources such as the Big Four, technology companies, and alternative service providers. At the same time, our

Interview with...



clients have more sophisticated demands so they need law firms that can innovate to fill those demands and deliver services better, faster, and cheaper.

What have you found is the best way to retain talented partners and associates?

I believe the best way to attract people is to give them the opportunity to grow and develop, both personally and professionally. This can be by doing challenging work for interesting clients. It can also be through coaching, or innovative development programmes, such as our award-winning senior development programme. We have also recently launched a new associate development programme for lawyers with three-plus years of experience who are on the senior associate promotion track.

Another important way to retain great talent is to give people a sense of purpose. At Dentons we encourage our lawyers to be active on pro bono work as well as sustainability and diversity initiatives.

Diversity is increasingly important to clients. How do law firms become more diverse, especially in leadership positions?

We are already diverse in terms of geography, language, and nationalities, and we proudly offer clients talent from diverse backgrounds with deep experience in every legal tradition in the world. We have created a global and a Europe diversity and inclusion committee to help drive initiatives to make Dentons even more inclusive.

One of the areas we are focusing on most is women's advancement. We have many amazingly talented and inspirational women professionals, but the fact is that not enough of them are making it to partner. This is an issue not only at Dentons, but in our profession as a whole. We are tackling this from a number of angles.

First it is about communication. We are having an open dialogue about the issues faced by women professionals, and are actively promoting the successes of our women leaders. It is also about building networks. We have created the WomenLEAD network within Dentons, and also hold networking events for our women clients. We recently conducted a working parents survey to find out what forms of support would help our people better balance their work and home responsibilities.

And finally, it is about development. Women typically make up about half of the participants in our leadership development programmes which are a key stepping stone towards partnership.

How can law firms best encourage innovation?

In terms of innovation, Dentons is probably best known for our Nextlaw Labs business, which works with legal tech start-ups to find ways to transform the legal profession. We are also looking at our own operations.

We have created a digital and innovation group, made up of people who are passionate about innovation. The group is

focused on developing new digital services, digitising our knowledge, finding ways to engage with our clients and help them understand the innovative solutions we can already offer.

One other unique approach we have introduced is to treat work on innovation projects the same as chargeable work. Any lawyer can put forward an innovative idea, and if that idea is approved, the hours they devote to further developing that idea are rewarded the same as for billable client work.

Since innovation usually comes from collaboration, we are also looking to engage our people more widely in the creative process. We have an ideation portal, where our people can share their ideas and comment on the ideas of others and develop them into actionable projects. Last year, we had a global innovation competition, where people from around the world shared their ideas for new products.

How do you stand apart in a crowded legal marketplace?

Firstly, as the world's largest law firm, we offer our clients wider geographic coverage than any other firm, and this is important because we are seeing more and more clients rationalising their legal panels down to a small handful of law firms that can serve them across all of the markets in which they operate. And with more than 9,000 lawyers, we are also more likely to have the exact lawyer with the exact skills a client needs than any other law firm.

We are also unique in our polycentric culture. We are deeply rooted in each local

community and understand the local business culture and legal framework. What works in New York does not necessarily work in Paris or Baku, and we understand that.

What are the top three things clients demand of their lawyers?

I believe that first and foremost, our clients expect us to be responsive. In today's fast-paced environment, they expect their lawyers to be available anytime anywhere, and to answer their questions right away – tomorrow is usually too late.

They also expect good value, which means not only competitive fees, but also transparency and control over their legal spend, while also providing quality advice.

And finally, and probably most importantly, they expect us to deliver results, and often that means going beyond just legal advice to provide business solutions.

Since becoming managing partner, what's surprised you most about running a law firm?

I took over as managing partner on 1 January, so I have just recently completed my first 100 days as a leader. What has surprised me most so far is simply how many different issues a managing partner needs to address.

On any given day, I am a coach, a mentor, a moderator, an office manager, a decision maker, a business developer... and all of this on top of maintaining my legal practice. Luckily I have a fantastic team, who support me in all these areas. ●