

How I Made Office Managing Partner: 'Be Willing to Say Yes to Any Opportunity,' Says Nicole M. Shaffer of Jackson Lewis



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By Tasha Norman

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Nicole M. Shaffer, 42, Jackson Lewis; Riverside, California

Job title: Office managing principal (OMP) of the Riverside, California, office

Practice area: Employment litigation

Law school and year of graduation: Whittier Law School, 2006

How long have you been at the firm? Almost 15 years

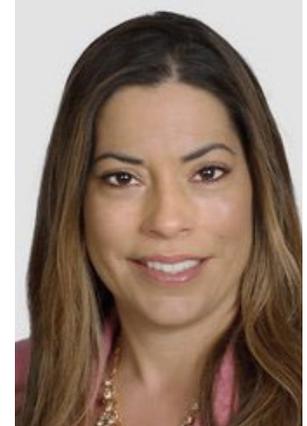
How long were you a partner at the firm? I was promoted to partner eight years ago

What year were you promoted/elected to your current role at your current firm? I was promoted to Riverside OMP in 2020.

What do you think was the deciding point for the firm in electing you to your current role? I started at Jackson Lewis in our Orange County (OC) office and over the last decade, the volume of work emerging from the Inland Empire (IE) area had significantly grown. In turn, the firm decided to open an office in Riverside, California, to supplement the work the OC attorneys were doing in the IE. I grew up in the IE and decided to move back, coincidentally around the same time as the Riverside office was coming into fruition. During the Riverside office launch, I began as an administrative partner, working alongside Samantha Hoffman who was OMP at the time. As administrative partner, I supervised the associates and helped develop and grow our team of attorneys. We launched the office during the COVID-19 pandemic, so it took a while to find the perfect office space and team

of attorneys, but I (as well as the firm) remained patient and calm throughout the process. During the Riverside office launch, firm leadership saw I had learned a lot about flexibility and showing grace for myself and others. I think those qualities significantly came into play when Samantha was promoted from OMP to firm managing principal (FMP) and the firm needed to elect a new Riverside OMP.

What are your key responsibilities and what unique challenges do you face as it relates to your role? As OMP, I focus on the day-to-day administrative duties of the office and ensure all attorneys are providing excellent client service. I also make sure junior associates are receiving the training and tools needed to learn how to provide the type of service our clients are accustomed to. There are some unique challenges, including building an office post-pandemic and balancing the evolving expectations for remote work. I don't think there is a one-size-fits-all solution, and what works best for the Riverside office may not work for a new office in another area of the country. This year, to mitigate challenges, we are being strategic in our ongoing recruitment efforts to



Nicole Shaffer,
Courtesy photo

continue attracting high-level and talented attorneys to build our attorney roster.

What's the best piece of advice you give to someone who wants to rise up the ranks to lead an office?

Be responsive, consistently produce high-quality work product, be approachable and provide outstanding client service. Also, be willing to say yes to any opportunity that comes your way, even if it takes you out of your comfort zone. Some of the best opportunities to showcase what you can offer come when you challenge yourself. Finally, be invested; it shows. Leadership always wants people who are invested in the firm, their career, their cases, clients, etc.

Who had the greatest influence in your career that helped propel you to your current role? FMP Samantha Hoffman has been a great influence and mentor throughout my tenure at Jackson Lewis. Samantha has risen through the ranks of the firm starting as an associate and later becoming OMP of the OC office for 10 years, before becoming Jackson Lewis' first FMP. She has served in several other leadership positions during her time at the firm and has helped open two offices, which makes her insight and guidance invaluable. Samantha truly leads by example and is incredibly supportive. Attorneys can easily become overwhelmed and whenever I have felt underwater the first thing she would always say to me is "How can I help?" The support she provides is consistent and selfless, regardless of how busy she is.

Knowing what you know now, what advice would you give to yourself and/or what would you do differently?

Be the best listener possible to teammates and clients to get a better sense of the whole picture and understand the client's needs and goals. I would also say to take everything one step at a time. It's very easy for attorneys to become overwhelmed and pulled in 100 different directions and you can lose sight of what you're working on or the task at hand. Finally, give whatever task or client you're speaking to or dealing with your full attention and not think at the same time about the other things that need to get done. If you tackle tasks one by one you will not be as overwhelmed and each client will feel like they're getting the level of service that they deserve.

What three words, phrases, goals or mantras would you use to describe your work mindset? Teamwork,

collegiality and a commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion. These are not soundbites; rather they are ideologies woven into the fabric of the firm. We are a firm where when a colleague calls and needs your help and asks you to work on a matter or issue for a client, the response is, "Absolutely, how can I help?" It's not about credit or "What's in it for me?" It's about being a true team—a true partnership—to get the best solution and results for our clients.

If you participate in firm or office initiatives, please mention the initiatives you are working on as well as the impact you hope to achieve. In 2015, fellow Jackson Lewis attorney Alison Lynch and I started a small attorney resource group for parents in the OC office called Practicing and Parenting (P&P). We both decided to start the group when we returned from maternity leave and were struggling with feeling unorganized, fatigued and guilty about going back to work. P&P meets to discuss the general struggles of work/life balance that come with being an attorney at a big firm while also trying to raise kids. It's important that junior attorneys know that they can have it all when it comes to being a successful attorney as well as being a present parent. P&P has conversations about utilizing flexible work arrangements and the firm's parental leave policy. The attorney resource group has attracted a number of lateral attorneys rather than been a strain on the firm's resources. P&P provides support to attorneys who are parents and opens the door to having conversations about work-life balance. Having these conversations helps with productivity and success at work and demonstrates that having children is openly valued by the firm.

As a law firm leader, what impact would you like to have on your firm and/or the legal industry as a whole?

I would like to help my peers and the legal industry better understand that attracting and retaining talent isn't a magic formula; you just have to make sure you're embracing accommodations and keeping an even playing field, no matter the minority group. At large, the legal industry is still old-school, and I think it is finally starting to sink in that junior attorneys can have both a family and an active legal career. At Jackson Lewis, I'm glad that I can help lay the groundwork for our attorneys to know they have options.