

With No Lateral Partners, This Leading Boutique Banks on Homegrown Talent

Aside from its founders from Kirkland & Ellis, the path to partnership at Bartlit Beck winds through the associate ranks. The firm's first new hiring partner says that won't change under her watch.

By David Thomas
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More than a quarter-century after spinning off from Kirkland & Ellis, litigation boutique Bartlit Beck is still committed to growth without taking on lateral partners.

That reliance on selecting and grooming the right fledgling lawyers makes the job of Bartlit Beck's hiring partner especially critical. And it's one reason the position has been always been held by one of the firm's founding partners—until now.

The Chicago-based, 85-lawyer firm will continue to eschew laterals and won't dramatically expand the number of associates it hires every year, said Cindy Sobel, who has taken over as hiring partner from Mark Ferguson. Ferguson was one of the 19 lawyers who defected from Kirkland in 1993.

"My goal is to continue doing what Mark has always done, which is to hire the best and the brightest and to hire new people who have incredible potential, but will also be an asset to our clients," Sobel said.

Sobel's promotion was preceded by the promotion of Jason Peltz as managing partner of the firm Jan. 1, 2018. Like Sobel, Peltz took over the managing partner role from Sidney "Skip" Herman, who had also originally defected from Kirkland.



Courtesy photo

Cindy Sobel, with Bartlit Beck

Peltz said the firm has never done any lateral partner hiring since its founding because it wants to preserve its "team-oriented culture." The clients Bartlit Beck represents—such as Walgreens in the national opioid litigation or Merck & Co. in lawsuits over its Vioxx medication—do not belong to any one partner at the firm.

“They belong to the firm,” Peltz said. “Because of that emphasis on the team-oriented culture, we believe that the best way to assure that that continues is growing from within. That’s one big reason. The other, quite frankly, is training. We focus an enormous amount of our time on training our junior lawyers.”

Peltz made it a point to note that, unlike other law firms, there are no committees at Bartlit Beck. Apart from Peltz and Sobel, the other leaders at the firm include Herman, now the chairman, and Meagan Newman, the chief operating officer.

Sobel said she will making hiring decisions “in collaboration with” Peltz. Both of them indicated that increasing the diversity of Bartlit Beck’s lawyers was a priority, as both the firm’s clients and its already-employed lawyers were demanding more inclusive teams.

Although the firm didn’t share information about the diversity of its lawyers as of press time, Peltz said approximately 50% of Bartlit Beck’s hires over the last decade have been women or people of color. Within the same time period, about 50% of the firm’s partner promotions have been women or people of color, Peltz said.

The associate and partner classes are small. In January of this year, the firm promoted only four



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associates to partner. Last year, it promoted five. Sobel noted that Bartlit Beck only hires one to three lawyers on average per year.

It’s a narrow but direct pipeline to partnership, with a leverage model that is highly unlike, say, Kirkland’s: Partners at Bartlit Beck outnumber associates by close to eight to one. The firm said its attorney attrition rate typically averages around 2% a year.

“It’s really important we make the right fit when it comes to hiring new attorneys here,” Sobel said.

I’m a reporter covering the business of law, with an emphasis on national and global law firms for The American Lawyer, Law.com and other ALM publications.