

Office Snapshot: Mayer Brown's Legacy In Chicago

By **Andrea Keckley**

Law360 (February 16, 2024, 4:08 PM EST) -- Mayer Brown's oldest and largest base, in Chicago, has been under new leadership for a year now, and its footprint in the Windy City has endured as alumni take prominent positions on the bench and the office keeps an eye on opportunities for both lateral and internal growth.

As construction and government transactions partner Joanna Horsnail approaches the one-year mark of her promotion to Chicago managing partner following more than 25 years at the firm, Mayer Brown's office remains one of the city's largest law offices, with more than 900 attorneys and staff.

"I would say practice focuses have evolved in terms of emerging legal trends and emerging legal needs, but our core practice strengths probably have stayed the same over that time," she told Law360 Pulse. "And that's really why we've maintained such a legacy in Chicago, I think."

In the year since Horsnail's appointment, Mayer Brown's Chicago office has elevated numerous associates to partner roles, welcomed back a former partner and seen another alumnus confirmed to the federal bench. It touts these moves as more firms set up competing shops in the city, including Armstrong Teasdale LLP, Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough LLP and Kilpatrick Townsend & Stockton LLP in 2023 alone.

The work

In Chicago, the firm has particularly strong finance, corporate, litigation and real estate teams, Horsnail said.

"We are moving to a certain degree away from really thinking about practice groups, and we're thinking more about industry group offerings," she noted.

Mayer Brown has had a presence in Chicago since 1881, with many members and alumni spending time in public service roles. Chicago-based Supreme Court and appellate partner Michael A. Scodro, for instance, served as Illinois solicitor general for more than six years. Former Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot worked as a partner at Mayer Brown before entering the political arena in 2019.

Additionally, several members of Chicago's federal bench have histories at Mayer Brown.

Just last month, the Senate voted 66-25 to confirm Magistrate Judge Joshua P. Kolar to the Seventh

Circuit after President Joe Biden nominated him last July. Judge Kolar, a U.S. Navy Reserve lieutenant commander, worked as an associate at Mayer Brown from 2003 to 2005 and from 2006 to 2007, according to the firm.

Another former Mayer Brown associate, Judge John Lee, was confirmed to the Seventh Circuit in 2022.

In the Northern District of Illinois, Mayer Brown alumni include Judges John Tharp and Robert Dow, as well as Senior Judge Thomas Durkin, who moved to senior status in December.

"We have always had a very strong litigation group," Horsnail said. "We've always been able to attract many post-clerks. When people come to us as post-clerks, they've already got relationships with judges and the judiciary."

The Leader

Horsnail became a managing partner in 2023, 25 years after she joined Mayer Brown as a junior associate. She succeeded Debra Bogo-Ernst, who left the firm for Willkie Farr & Gallagher LLP.

"It is a little unusual to be sitting in this leadership position that I'm sitting in now, having taken a somewhat non-traditional path," she said.

Horsnail was expecting her first child when she was being considered for a partnership. While some outside the firm cautioned her against it, she went out on a limb and asked for a reduced-hours commitment before she knew if she'd get to become a partner.

It paid off. Horsnail made partner while she was on maternity leave, and returned to work on a 70% commitment.

Today, Horsnail says the use of alternative work schedules has increased dramatically — and for more than just child care.

"I can think of a lot of examples of people in the office who are working AWS schedules, not for child care or young-child-related reasons, which I love that we've gotten to that point," she said. "And it's men and women."

Horsnail has often spoken candidly about what it took to build a home and a career side by side. In a 2016 TED Talk called "The Power of Time," she spoke about welcoming a second son with severe disabilities and getting divorced not long after. Today, her oldest is in college, and her youngest is 18 years old.

"I'm very grateful that I had some flexibility and that I have really supportive colleagues and really supportive leadership," she said. "And people continued to give me the leadership roles that I desired as well."

She focuses her practice on design and construction, project finance and government transactions. She's represented a number of both public and private sector clients, including counseling the state of Illinois in connection with Google's purchase of Chicago's James R. Thompson Center in 2022.



Joanna Horsnail

The team

933 total employees
397 total attorneys
170 partners
158 associates
64 counsel/senior counsel
5 other attorneys
536 nonattorney professional staff

The Office

Broadband Providers

Mayer Brown's Chicago office is at 71 S. Wacker Drive.

"I think we count ourselves as lucky in that we were a little ahead of the curve and that we moved into our current building in 2005," Horsnail said. "And when we decided to extend our lease in 2017, we did a nice refreshed overhaul."

As part of that overhaul, the team built out its common space on the 32nd floor of its building. Today, it has a boardroom for internal and external meetings, a conference space and a lounge.

The team currently works on-site during the three middle days of the week but can work remotely on Mondays and Fridays. They work out of a 48-story office building in the Loop neighborhood, which is known for its walkability.

"I think one of the interesting things that we're seeing in Chicago is people moving into offices that are not in the traditional kind of Lawyers' Row area," Horsnail said. "And some of these recent moves have had me scratching my head with train accessibility."

Comings and Goings

Last summer, a veteran Mayer Brown attorney became one of many members to transition to the public sector.

Former partner Mary Richardson-Lowry was appointed by Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson as city corporation counsel, advising the city's departments, boards and council. She isn't new to working in Chicago's government, having previously served as Department of Buildings commissioner prior to the 14 years she spent with Mayer Brown.

In another high-profile departure, Joel Gustafson, Mayer Brown's former chief technology officer, left the firm last April to take up the same position at Crowell & Moring LLP.

The following September, Mayer Brown welcomed back Ryan Lawrence, who worked there as an associate from 2006 to 2012 and as a partner from 2016 to 2017. He returned to the firm with extensive in-house experience, including as general counsel at both Avant and Shift, deputy general counsel at Cushman & Wakefield LLP's corporate division, and assistant general counsel at Royal Caribbean Cruises Ltd.

However, Horsnail says the firm also wants to invest in internal talent. Mayer Brown's most recent 64-

person partner class included 10 attorneys in Chicago — more than at any of its other locations.

"I think it's just as important to try to retain and promote our homegrown talent as it is to look for strategic lateral growth," she said.

--Additional reporting by Tracey Read, Courtney Bubl , Katie Buehler, James Arkin, Emily Lever, Charlie Innis, Jack Rodgers and Aaron West. Editing by Robert Rudinger.

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