

Illinois Powerhouse: Mayer Brown

By Tracey Read

Law360 (September 5, 2025, 4:00 PM EDT) -- Over the past year, Mayer Brown LLP has advised the state of Illinois in the continued implementation of its plan to repurpose Chicago's landmark James R. Thompson Center through a sale to Google, represented TikTok Inc. on multiple matters and garnered a win in an ERISA lawsuit that could have wide-reaching effects for employers.

Those cases and others earned the firm a spot among Law360's Regional Powerhouses for 2025.

Mayer Brown was founded in 1881 in the Windy City, and Chicago remains the largest office of the global firm, which has 1,149 lawyers in the United States. There are now 356 attorneys in the firm's only Illinois office, according to Joanna Horsnail, office managing partner. The office is known for its finance, corporate and litigation work, as well as its lengthy record of public service at the federal, state and local levels.



"Our people have always been very civically minded and civically engaged and have wanted to invest in the city of Chicago and the state of Illinois and make it a world-class place for us all to work and live," Horsnail said. "We have had a long history that continues today, of our partners and other attorneys, and business service staff members being engaged in civic organizations, being engaged in nonprofit organizations, and even going in and out of government service and politics."

Notable politicians who spent time at the office include the late Tyrone C. Fahner, former chair of Mayer Brown, who was the Illinois attorney general in the early 1980s; ex-Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot, a previous Mayer Brown litigation and conflict resolution partner; and former partner William M. Daley, who had been White House chief of staff under President Barack Obama.

Current lawyers in prior high-profile government positions include former Illinois Solicitor General Michael Scodro and John Schmidt, associate U.S. attorney general under President Bill Clinton, the firm said.

"When I was a very young lawyer interviewing here, I was so intrigued by the fact that there were a number of partners here who had been in government service in fairly high levels, and very engaged in politics and civics within the city of Chicago," Horsnail said. "That's something I have really enjoyed in my career, serving on a lot of boards and being very engaged in the community."

Horsnail advised the Illinois Department of Central Management Services on its sale of the Thompson Center to Google for use as the technology company's Chicago headquarters. Since the sale was announced in 2022, the firm has continued to provide advice on contract implementation as the work has progressed.

"That was a really interesting, very, very different deal," Horsnail said. "We represented the state of Illinois. They negotiated with the developer to basically sell the space — which had been a headquarter space for the first state of Illinois buildings — to a developer who is renovating it for Google, and then Google will become a tenant in that space."

Mayer Brown also represented TikTok and parent company ByteDance Inc. in a consolidated class action arising from allegations that the defendants collected TikTok app users' keystrokes and button clicks entered on third-party websites accessed through the app's in-app browsing feature.

In an Oct. 1 opinion, an Illinois federal judge said although the plaintiffs' claims under California's Unfair Competition Law are enough to establish an Article III injury, they don't appear to be enough to plead a violation of the law.

In addition, the firm defended Marmon Holdings Inc., a Berkshire Hathaway-owned industrial holding company, in a proposed class action alleging in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois that the holding company breached its fiduciary duties by imprudently selecting and retaining custom target date funds in its 401(k) plan. On May 14, the court granted Marmon's motion to dismiss the Employee Retirement Income Security Act lawsuit, which claimed the company's use of proprietary target date funds cost plan participants millions of dollars in potential retirement benefits.

"We are proud of the outcome in this case — dismissal of the entire lawsuit at the pleadings stage without the need for extensive discovery," Mayer Brown partner Elaine Liu said. "This represents an important win not only specifically for Marmon, but also in general for any employer that sponsors a retirement plan."

The case addressed the pleading standard that is required for a plaintiff to successfully state a claim for breach of fiduciary duties under ERISA with respect to allegedly imprudent investments and recordkeeping services.

"This is an area where countless class action lawsuits continue to be filed against large companies, universities, and other institutions every year, the burden of discovery and the potential exposure are often significant, and courts have continued to reach different conclusions on what a plaintiff needs to plead — even after the Supreme Court and the Seventh Circuit issued multiple decisions on this in recent years," Liu said.

Looking ahead, the office has also been busy lately with lateral hiring — perhaps the busiest Horsnail has seen in her 27 years at the firm.

"The lateral market is more of a feeding frenzy in Chicago now than it has ever been, with a lot of firms recognizing that this is a special place to do business," she said.

Since February, the firm said, it has brought on six new Chicago partners — four of whom were "boomerang" attorneys returning to Mayer Brown from other law firms and positions.

For instance, in June, the firm rehired Chicago-based Rick Nowak, the former co-chair of its practice focused on retirement benefit matters. Nowak left Mayer Brown in 2021 for Fidelity Investments, where he was vice president and associate general counsel.

"I think that speaks very highly of Mayer Brown's Chicago office — that people would leave, consider another opportunity and then come back," Horsnail said. "We are on a real streak of people wanting to come back, which I think, that's the best advertisement, right?"

--Additional reporting by Lauraann Wood, Patrick Hoff and Jack Rodgers. Editing by Nick Petruncio.