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Norton Rose Fulbright's US Leader On Investment In Non-Lawyer Roles

By **Xiumei Dong**

Law360 (August 9, 2023, 10:03 AM EDT) -- While several major law firms have been downsizing their business services and reducing nonlawyer staff, Norton Rose Fulbright is steering in a different path as the firm embraces expansion in these very areas.


Jeff Cody

Since 2021, the firm has increased its business services and legal support headcount by more than 12% with approximately 100 people added. According to Jeff Cody, the firm's U.S. managing partner, Norton Rose has 800 to 850 professional staff supporting the firm in various functions, including financial services, marketing and development, people development and information tech.

As the firm sets its sights on surpassing the 1,000-lawyer mark within the next few years, Cody said the growth will naturally trigger a demand for more business services professionals as well.

Cody talked with Law360 Pulse about the deeper reasoning behind the firm's strategic investment, the potential effect of technology on growth and the significant role of non-lawyer professionals in senior leadership. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

What is driving the expansion of business services and non-lawyer investment in your firm?

In 2021, the firm implemented a five-year strategic plan, and part of that plan was to grow the law firm from a legal services perspective, meaning our lawyers and how we serve our clients. This necessarily involves expanding the business services functions within the firm to support our lawyers and clients as we move forward. So our approach over the last two or three years has been on deploying and trying to expand what we do as a firm.

Which specific functions within your firm have undergone growth?

All of our departments have grown. We've seen a demand for the services in those groups, and we've needed to meet that demand. So our financial services function has increased, our marketing and development function has increased, our IT function has increased, and our people function has also increased, as has our practice function.

The cause of this is what we have observed in the firm, especially over the last two years, is an increased

demand for legal services. That means our clients are wanting more from us. And in order to meet that demand, we've had to grow in terms of our headcount, and our lawyers, our partners. And then that also translates into an increased headcount among our service professionals.

Will the advancement of AI and other technologies affect your firm's investment in professional staff?

We are closely looking at AI. I believe that AI can have a very profound impact on the legal industry over the next two to five to 10 years, and maybe the most dramatic changes we see are caused by AI, but I think it is too early to tell at this point how that's gonna play out. We're monitoring it very carefully. We have a number of practice groups or working groups in the firm that are looking at the different aspects of AI and how it affects. But right now, we don't see and don't have any plans for AI to limit our staffing needs as we go forward; we're increasing the numbers of our business services, we're certainly not retracting.

The way we are built and where we're trying to go, I view that any additional technology creates more efficiency and allows our business services professionals to do more. I don't view it as a vehicle to cut costs and to try to eliminate jobs. So it's our intent to continue pushing forward with technology solutions to make their jobs better and help them perform at a higher level. But not at the expense of somebody's job.

Could you provide more details about the firm's commitment to mentorship and professional growth, including the upcoming senior-level mentorship academy in Houston in August?

We have implemented what we will call our mentorship program. We did that in July. And we have about 120 or so people that have signed up and are participating in that from the business services team. The idea of that program started back with our racial equity council, which we formed in 2020, and there were mentoring programs that our business services folks were involved in setting up.

We are having a business services academy, and that's going to be in the next couple of weeks in Houston. We've identified 26 non-manager business services professionals to participate, and they were identified by their chiefs who oversee their groups. We view them as our rising stars, and it's a way that the firm can invest in them and help them continue to develop and mature their skills. So in a year or two, they're preparing for and beginning to enter that management level of the firm.

How do you view the trend of law firms increasingly including non-lawyer professionals in senior leadership positions, expanding their C-suite to encompass a wider range of expertise?

The non-lawyer opportunities in law firms, particularly taking senior leadership positions, continue to expand and grow. And our firm is one of those firms that has been embracing and looking at it. We have some very strong leaders in what I would call our chief roles who are non-lawyers, but they play an integral role in what we do as a firm, and I think we've seen great success there. And we're going to continue to lean into that model.

--Editing by Brian Baresch.

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