

Law Firm Leaders: Bradley Arant's Jonathan Skeeters

By Aebra Coe

Law360 (December 18, 2019, 1:25 PM EST) -- Jonathan Skeeters took up the role of managing partner at 500-attorney Bradley Arant Boulton Cummings LLP in September 2018. Since then the law firm has revised its strategic plan and opened up its 10th office, which is located in Dallas.

Here, Skeeters outlines his vision for the law firm's future, how the firm is working to make use of technology to benefit clients, and the qualities he looks for in a lateral partner hire.

What are your goals for the law firm over the next five years?

We just finished a new strategic plan this summer. We had a big partner meeting, partner retreat, in April of this year and put a bunch of things on the table to talk about: law firm growth, innovation, the associate-to-partner track. We put all that on the table and talked about it candidly. We got a lot of good feedback and the board took that and finalized a plan July 1.

One of the things we're doing that is different, we were already doing a lot of this, but now we're trying to be more intentional about the industries that we service. We're trying to do more of an industry focus instead of a subject matter or practice group focus. We boiled it down to a few industries that our top 250 clients are associated with and that we feel we have brand recognition regionally and nationally in already. They were banking and financial services, construction and infrastructure, health care. Those are probably the biggest three. We also do a lot of pharmaceutical work, a lot of mass-tort-type litigation. That's another area we feel like we can play in more on that regional and national scale from our footprint as a mostly Southern-facing law firm.

Was the Dallas office your first outside of the South?

Back in 2009, Bradley Arant Rose & White firm and Boulton Cummings Connors & Berry firms merged. Boulton's only office was in Nashville with around 100 lawyers, and the Bradley Arant side of the family was in Birmingham, Montgomery and Huntsville in Alabama; Jackson, Mississippi; Charlotte, North Carolina; and Washington, D.C. What we've done, since then the firm has opened a Tampa office, a Houston office and a Dallas office, in that order.



Jonathan Skeeters
Bradley Arant
managing partner

Do you have national ambitions for the firm?

It's not a must for us. I think we would be opportunistic for other markets outside our footprint. If we were to grow to the West Coast, Mountain West, or Midwest, it would have to fall into one of our core industry groups and strengths. Our focus at least for now is in our existing markets, building out the talent in Tampa, Charlotte, Houston and Dallas. Those are such great markets and there's a lot of opportunities in those core markets for continued growth.

Do you think there's an advantage to being a firm mostly based in the South? What are the opportunities that presents?

It has been an advantage for us. One, when 2007 and 2008 occurred and we merged in 2009 we didn't really experience any slowdown. The South, at least our markets, were more insulated from the downturn. We're also a pretty diversified firm in terms of clients. We had some that were up and some that were down, but we were pretty steady through the downturn.

That southern footprint has also been beneficial in that there's a lot of economic growth, there have been a lot of corporate relocations to the Southeast and South. Dallas is probably one of the hottest markets for that. Nashville has been a huge beneficiary of that, and you're getting it in Tampa and Charlotte as well. We're benefiting from those being high-growth markets. A lot of the states we're in are business-friendly and offering economic incentives for firms to either relocate or expand and create jobs. Texas, Florida and North Carolina have all been very active in that space in trying to provide incentives for companies and for job growth.

You said at the retreat you talked about growth, innovation and the partner track. Were there changes made to the partner track?

It's the same. It's just that it's a talent war out there for young, up-and-coming attorneys, so we wanted to make sure we were still being competitive in attracting the right talent and that we had a focus on training and mentoring associates. And that they still really had the opportunity to make partner. I think we're able to be more competitive on that front, on the partnership track front, than some of our bigger competitors. Our cost structure and the size of the firm still allows us to be a place where we can still do that. You can come, learn, be trained and mentored, and make partner.

When it comes to innovation, is there anything that your firm is doing different from the rest of the industry?

Probably not. We're doing some internal assessments as well as monitoring what's going on out in the market. Internally, we have a lot of data — on cases, outcomes, pricing. So what we're trying to do is collect our data and use the data we've got to be in a position to tell clients, we've done so many of these cases we can predict certain outcomes, we can predict pricing. We have those internal data analytics initiatives that we're taking on so we can go to clients and be smarter about predicting staffing and pricing. Clients like more certainty, particularly on pricing and budgeting. We have years of experience and if you can add some predictability into that where everybody isn't just guessing what this will cost, I think that's a better experience for the law firm and the clients.

How would you describe the culture of your law firm?

We are a place with high expectations for quality and character and we put a big emphasis on that. We

don't tolerate screamers and yellers. That's just a no-no. We've asked partners to leave who can't get along with people, regardless of their book of business. It's quality, character, hard work.

What does your firm look for in a lateral?

From a partner standpoint, we're going to be looking for that partner to be strategically important in a subject matter area we need or a current industry group that we're focused on and that person is another piece to the puzzle. And then it's the character, quality and fit from a cultural standpoint. We are looking for people we know, who we have experience with. Either we have worked with in the past, we went to law school with them, or see them at every trade association event. So there's a connection with the law firm in some form or fashion that we feel good about. It's not just their book of business and subject matter expertise, but then you go to quality, culture and fit.

What well-known lawyer, alive or dead, would you most like to have lunch and why?

I'd say Abraham Lincoln. He was a lawyer first and foremost. And then, obviously, he was a president to be admired. From what I have read about him in his days as a lawyer, he took on a lot of challenging cases and a lot of tough issues. I think it would be interesting to talk to him about how that part of this life informed and influenced his presidency and some of those hard decisions he had to make.

--Editing by Katherine Rautenberg.