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## Robins Kaplan Partner Talks New Training Efforts

By **Emma Cueto**

Law360 (March 15, 2023, 4:31 PM EDT) -- Trial firm Robins Kaplan LLP has always had a robust training program — complete with a mock courtroom in its offices — but the firm's newly updated initiative integrates that training into every part of the firm and increases focus on skills needed in today's legal market, the chair of the firm's professional development committee said.

Carrie Lambert, a partner in Minneapolis, started at Robins Kaplan as an associate in 2001 and said she's a beneficiary of its long-standing commitment to training new litigators. After leaving the firm in 2013 and returning in 2022, she helped revamp that training for a post-pandemic world.



Carrie Lambert

She spoke to Law360 Pulse about why the firm decided to make the shift, whether today's associates care more about work-life balance, and what skills young lawyers need in the modern legal industry.

### Where did the idea for the new program come from?

The firm has always been very committed to training our lawyers, especially on core litigation skills. I was lucky enough to come up through one of our first big training programs back in the aughts. We did that for a long time, and it has now evolved into our First Chair program. It really focuses on deposition and trial skills — those practice skills that our litigators and trial lawyers really need.

So we've done that since before I started, and it's a cornerstone of our professional development goals to keep using that.

But as we went through COVID, as you can imagine, it was hard for us to continue working on those core litigation skills training programs, because so many of them depend on being on your feet in front of a witness or a judge, so some of our training programs we just weren't able to do.

So when we got back into the office — we officially have people in three days a week, though a lot of people come in more — we were able to go back to the drawing board and figure out what people want more training in and what we thought the legal market is focusing on and how things have changed since we looked at our professional development program. We did some research, internally and externally, and came up with a great overall, comprehensive program that not only gets at core litigation skills like deposition and motion practice but also gets at all the other things — business development, leadership, case management, [diversity, equity and inclusion], project management, and pricing and budgeting.

We've always been committed to training our lawyers to be the best trial lawyers they can be, and with COVID, we were able to pause and step back and look at it fresh, and this is what we came up with.

### When you did that research, what were some things that stood out to you about the way the market has changed or what skills lawyers need today?

So many things! We're always going to focus — and the market in litigation is always going to focus

— on writing and oral advocacy skills. But with the pressure on legal services and what clients need — that rapid responsiveness — that has really changed and is starting at a junior stage, coming right out of law school.

So we now start pretty early on working with associates on how you structure your cases, how you schedule your case work and your life. That life and work balance is important for this generation. It maybe was a little more skewed in olden times! But now we want to make sure that people are getting the help they need to manage their cases so we are maximizing our time in the office.

In addition, we are starting inclusive leadership programming for all of our associates, starting at a first-tier level, working with them on diversity, equity and inclusion. So they start off being inclusive leaders with themselves, and then inclusive leaders of their teams, and then inclusive leaders in the firm and in their community. And not to say we didn't focus on DEI before, but in today's day and age, it needs to be throughout all of your programs, and people should be thinking about DEI at every stage of [their] career.

And finally — and this has really changed since I started out twenty-some years ago — is the emphasis on legal project management and pricing. Going hand in hand with what I mentioned about pressure from clients, there's a lot of competition for legal services and a lot of pressure on pricing. It's important to have associates understand those pressures at every stage of their career and that we're providing the best budgets for our clients. Understanding the ins and outs of the budget and how the case looks long term and how that might affect their clients' bottom line, we really try to train on that.

So those are the three areas we wanted to add more in now, but we are still focused on those core litigation skills, too.

## **When looking at professional development these days, what are the sorts of things that junior attorneys want? Are young attorneys still looking for the same types of career development today?**

Well, it has been an interesting couple of years! I think that our firm attracts a unique lawyer to begin with because we are a litigation firm, so we tend to recruit lawyers who are very driven and interested in getting their feet wet with complex cases and taking on a lot of responsibility. So in that sense, we still have associates with the drive to be great trial lawyers.

The reason we did this revamping of the program is because they were asking for it. They wanted more interaction with partners and more real-life experience because of COVID.

And so from that perspective, I think it's the same. They want the same opportunities. They want to perform as well as anyone can — and they do. But on the other side — maybe because of COVID and everyone taking a breather from the type of lifestyle we had before — there is more emphasis on work-life balance, and a more holistic approach that we're taking into consideration with this new program.

I think that's maybe generational, but there are more opportunities to practice in different ways now. Whether it's in a part-time capacity or a nonpartner-track capacity, there are many opportunities that didn't exist before. And we want people to feel supported in their practice as a lawyer and a person.

## **How does the training program play into the big picture at Robins Kaplan?**

That's actually one of the reasons we did revamp things. ... We had almost too many trainings, and they were a little all over the place. So now we have a calendar, and training and professional development is more intentional and built around other things going on at the firm and incorporated into things going on at the firm.

For example, we have an associate meeting every month, and during the meetings now, 20 minutes is some topic of training that applies to all associates, 20 minutes is an associate talking about a case result and another 20 minutes about firm updates. So we're trying to weave things in. We want to

make sure everyone knows what's going on and make room for the training. Talking about work-life balance, we want them to be able to plan ahead and make adjustments and structure their work and life balance around it.

So training complements all of our other programs. And it has always been a cornerstone of the firm, but it's really at the forefront now, and I think everyone across the firm is excited about it.

--Editing by Gemma Horowitz.

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