

# LEADERS

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# MLS WORKS

An Interview with JoAnn Neale,  
Chief Administrative and Social Responsibility Officer, Major League Soccer

**EDITOR'S NOTE** JoAnn Neale leads human resources, administration, social responsibility and player engagement for Major League Soccer. She is responsible for the strategic oversight of all aspects of the human resources department, including employee relations, talent acquisition, diversity and inclusion, succession planning, benefits, talent development, compensation, human resources information systems, culture and core values. Neale also leads the administration department, where she is responsible for office design, space planning, vendor management, compliance and day-to-day office services and facility operations.



JoAnn Neale

As the architect of MLS WORKS, the League's social responsibility platform, Neale spearheads its overall strategy. Under her direction, MLS WORKS has established a commitment to social responsibility through national programs, charitable giving and by undertaking grassroots initiatives in underserved communities. In addition, Neale oversees programs to support player education and engagement, and assists with off-field career development and transition. Neale sits on the Board of Directors for the U.S. Soccer Foundation, was named a SportsBusiness Journal Game Changer, and was honored by New York City and State to The Responsible 100 and by the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women for her leadership in social responsibility.

Prior to joining MLS, Neale spent four years as an attorney at the law firms of Latham & Watkins and Duval & Stachenfeld, where she focused on corporate finance and real estate transactions. Neale earned her law degree from New York University's School of Law, graduating cum laude, and received a B.S. degree, with distinction, from Cornell University.

**ORGANIZATION BRIEF** Major League Soccer ([mlsoccer.com](http://mlsoccer.com)) features 26 clubs throughout the United States and Canada, including future expansion teams in Nashville, Miami and Cincinnati. As MLS has quickly become one of the world's top soccer leagues, it has become a league of choice for dynamic players in the prime of their careers. These players combine with a passionate, millennial-fueled supporter culture to provide an exhilarating live experience at every match. With players from more than 70 different countries competing, MLS is the most diverse sports league in the world.

**Will you discuss your journey in law school and what led you to make a change in your area of focus?**

I went straight from college to law school, and I had always been intent on going into litigation. I thought I would have enjoyed and been energized by the adversarial nature of litigation.

As a summer associate, I was placed on a litigation team and quickly realized it wasn't for me. While the idea of being inside a courtroom was exciting, the reality was that most cases didn't reach a courtroom for years, if ever, and the work was heavily focused on research.

After law school, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to go to a law firm that didn't require associates to specialize in their first year. I could take a year or two to dabble in different areas of the law.

Early in my career I was assigned various matters ranging from bankruptcy and corporate finance to mergers and acquisitions. I soon realized I preferred transactional work to litigation. I found corporate transactions to be more fulfilling because they aren't zero-sum games; lawyers on both sides of the table work towards a common goal to get the deal done.

**When the opportunity presented itself to join Major League Soccer, what excited you about the organization and made you feel it was the right fit?**

When I was studying for the Bar Exam in the summer of 1994, the World Cup was taking place in the U.S. I grew up playing soccer and always loved the sport, so my friends and I would take breaks from studying and watch the games. It was during the 1994 World Cup that the formation of Major League Soccer was announced, and I recall thinking it was something I would love to be involved with. Fast forward several years, the opportunity presented itself to come in-house to join the legal department at Major League Soccer and I thought it was meant to be.

I got lucky. It was a matter of being in the right place at the right time. A friend of mine had left her job to come to MLS to work in the marketing department. When she was coming over, I asked her to let me know if anything opened in the legal department. She had been at MLS for a few months and called me to send her my resume.

I was willing to take a risk. We didn't know at the time if the league was going to be viable, but I was willing to take a chance.

**While you joined Major League Soccer as part of the legal department, do you feel that in many ways you have been provided the opportunity to have a number of different careers within the organization?**

I have been so fortunate in that I have been able to pivot and expand my role during my career at the League. I'm always looking for new opportunities – that is my nature- and I like to be intellectually challenged. After working in the legal department for many years, I took over human resources, administration and facilities, where I spearheaded a team responsible for all the logistics of moving MLS to our current headquarters in Manhattan.

Around 2006, our executive team started discussing the need to have a social responsibility platform. We felt it was important to give back to the communities that were supporting us and to the public at large.

I stepped up and offered to lead the charge in figuring out what platform might work for us and what our focus should be. MLS WORKS launched in 2007.

**MLS has been an organization that was committed early on to building a diverse workforce. How critical is it to have diverse thought and backgrounds at the organization?**

There is so much research out there that shows organizations that are diverse make better business decisions.

With that premise, it makes complete sense to strive for diversity across the board, including hiring people of different races, genders, ethnicities and backgrounds to foster diversity of thought so that the organization is positioned to make the best decisions.

If people sitting around the table all think the same way, no one will be challenged to think outside the box and come up with innovative and creative solutions.

As a business imperative, it's really important. As an organization, we have always been focused on that and strive for ways to drive diversity in our workforce. We have made great strides in diversity at all levels of the organization, and we are committed to continuing to improve.



*Leveraging the power of sport, MLS, ESPN and Special Olympics have partnered to promote an environment of social inclusion by uniting people with and without intellectual disabilities through Special Olympics Unified Sports. (above); Major League Soccer clubs conducted activations during the inaugural Soccer For All month of June to showcase the collective efforts taking place throughout the League to foster more inclusive communities. (below)*

**Will you highlight the vision for MLS WORKS and how you decide which areas to support?**

When people ask me what the hardest part of my job is, I tell them it's having to say no to organizations that ask us to partner on amazing and worthy causes. We have to be strategic about our areas of focus.

We have done a significant amount of research, starting with our current and future fans who tend to be millennial, and are 50 percent female and 35 percent Hispanic. The research shows that social responsibility is very important to them.

Also, when we dove in deeper with our fans, we wanted to understand what they thought Major League Soccer should be focused on and what areas matter most to them.

We also spoke to our players and MLS Players Union, as well as our corporate partners and clubs. We landed on four key pillars.

**What are those areas?**

The first is diversity and inclusion. I'm so proud of this initiative. We recently rebranded the platform as *Soccer for All*. We are the most diverse professional league in North America; our players come from more than 70 countries. There is a clear alignment there and it makes so much sense, especially given the demographics of our fan base. Everybody is welcome and nobody who is a part of our game should feel any form of discrimination. That is really close to our hearts.

The second area we are focusing on is environmental sustainability. We always supported green initiatives, but we are diving deeper and investing more in this area. In 2017, we decided to measure our carbon impact around our MLS All-Star Game presented by Target. We decided to purchase offsets around an initiative in Kenya. In Kenya, women do most of the cooking on inefficient stoves that release

cancerous toxins into the air. MLS invested in energy efficient stoves to not only offset our carbon impact, but also to have a positive health effect on the women and children who were using them.

The third area is our Soccer Kicks Cancer initiative, where our primary activations are held in September around Pediatric Cancer Awareness Month. We are really proud of this initiative. All of our clubs participate and our players are super supportive of this cause. Many players regularly visit children's hospitals and have ongoing interactions with patients. In addition to raising awareness and providing special experiences to cancer patients, we raise money for Children's Oncology Group. Children's Oncology Group is a research organization dedicated to finding cures for all types of pediatric cancers.

The fourth area is youth enrichment. We work with the U.S. Soccer Foundation to build soccer fields in urban communities, and to



provide after-school programming and access to the sport for kids that might not otherwise have that. We are also planning to expand into schools in 2019 with an anti-bullying educational curriculum.

**When it comes to engaging employees in these types of efforts, how important is internal messaging and communicating about all of the work MLS is doing?**

Everyone in the organization supports MLS WORKS' initiatives. We encourage employees to do volunteer work and we give volunteer time off in addition to regular vacation days. We also try to engage our employees around the initiatives of MLS WORKS, like our week of service around Earth Day. We seek to align our in-house volunteer efforts with our social responsibility platform.

**Are you able to put metrics around MLS' social responsibility programs to track impact?**

This is challenging to do because much of our work is intangible. We do, of course, have some data-driven metrics, such as social media engagement, and money raised for certain causes, which can help us get a sense of our reach and impact.

Fan engagement is more difficult to measure. Fortunately, we're committed to doing this work because it's the right thing to do and social responsibility is one of our core values.

**The league is committed to supporting players off the field and providing programs and education to learn and prepare for post-career opportunities. How important is this effort and do you feel that this is a responsibility for the league?**

Our players are our number one asset and we recognize that if we want to have a long-term positive relationship with them, it's important to invest in them in ways other than what they're doing on the field. The average playing career of a professional athlete is around five years. We are committed to helping our players transition into the next phase of their lives after their professional playing career ends.

Our goal is to help players think about what comes next while they're still playing for us. We want to give them the training, tools and opportunities to be set up for success in the next phase of their lives. ●