

One-Firm Philosophy

An Interview with
Mary B. Kuusisto, Partner, Proskauer



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EDITORS' NOTE *Mary Kuusisto is head of the firm's London office and a partner in the Private Investment Funds Group and Tax Department. Prior to becoming a lawyer, Kuusisto worked for several years as a certified public accountant with Big 4 public accounting firms.*

FIRM BRIEF *Founded in 1875, Proskauer (proskauer.com) is a global law firm providing a broad and sophisticated range of legal services to clients worldwide from 13 offices in the Americas, Europe, and Asia. Consistently recognized as a leader for work ranging from complex, cross-border transactions to high-stakes litigation, the firm represents many of the world's leading businesses, financial institutions, investment funds, not-for-profit institutions, governmental entities, and other organizations across a wide array of industries.*

What attracted you to law and how did your transition from accounting develop?

I was drawn to law for the intellectual puzzle of it; however, I stayed for the people – and the two are very related. Our clients now are doing such innovative things in the private investment funds world that every day I'm doing something new.

How dynamic is the environment that a firm like Proskauer offers?

Our clients are really evolving with the market and doing new things, so we're continuously having to creatively apply existing legal principles to new structures, products, or opportunities.

There are the inevitable legal changes but it's what our clients are doing that is moving the market – and being part of that really excites and challenges me and my team on a daily basis.

Will you talk about the growth you've seen within the London office and how close is the coordination for the firm region to region?

Proskauer is a firm that takes its one-firm philosophy quite far. We're structured not so much office by office as we are by client offering.

We are focused on what we have to offer clients and industries from a service perspective globally rather than in any one particular geographic area. By way of example, our private investment funds group works across many offices – London, Boston, New York, Los Angeles, Hong Kong, Beijing – because that's what our clients today need and expect. We have a multitranche finance group that started out of Boston but the London market is very significant, as is New York and Asia, and so we have scaled up our global practice considerably.

Our view is that we're strongest by looking at how our clients are operating, and they're operating globally so we do that as well. That's really why we opened the London office.

How challenging is it to differentiate and, within Proskauer, how do you define that difference?

Differentiation is obviously a challenge, but for us it's about conveying two sides of things: how we add value for our clients and how we work together to effectively deliver that service.

We focus in London in particular on the asset management industry – an industry that has significantly evolved over the years, especially in my area of expertise, the private investment fund space. As a firm we are market focused and not afraid to adapt.

How we are different I believe has a lot to do with how we recruit. We hand-pick our partners – business-savvy lawyers – who have the right experience and business acumen, and who share the same cultural values and goals. This makes our integration processes very collaborative.

We want both our own people and our clients to be successful and so we operate in a way that allows teams to easily work together across practices and offices. This means our clients get the best service by allowing them to leverage knowledge and expertise across the entire network.

Does your client base cross different size companies?

We have clients from newly formed organizations to Fortune 50 companies, and each individual lawyer may have clients in all of those different size and rank firms.

This makes it interesting. We get to see our clients evolve and grow over time. It's equally interesting working with people when they are just getting started, and it's critical to their success to have someone advise them well.

How important is diversity within a firm like Proskauer when it comes to your broad range of clients?

Our clients are diverse and we are as well. We have more than 50 women in our partnership now. In London, 31 percent of our partners are women, which is above the industry average.

Having a diverse partnership does a number of things: first, it allows us to be better decision-makers and analyzers. When we have different perspectives coming together to solve a problem, we're probably going to see things we wouldn't have seen otherwise. This makes us stronger as a firm internally and for purposes of serving our clients with respect to legal analysis.

As we have grown, we have brought in lawyers to the partnership who have similar shared values, but with diverse backgrounds. With so many different viewpoints coming together, I believe this is one of the defining aspects of our successful partnership.

Second, our clients come from different backgrounds and cultures, and they expect us to reflect that and see things from their perspective as well. Having that allows us to enhance the client relationship.

How critical is pro bono work for the firm, especially in terms of bringing in talent?

Pro bono work is deeply ingrained in our culture and in everything we do. We are proud to partner with pro bono organizations to offer our services and do this across all of our offices. In London, we partner with a number of local organizations to help make a difference for those who truly need it. We firmly believe that it is our responsibility as a business to give back to our local communities. It is also important for our lawyers to feel they are able to make a difference and pursue areas they have a very strong personal interest in.

Will you talk more about Proskauer's Women's Sponsorship Program?

Our program matches female lawyers with senior partners and approaches career development beyond traditional mentoring. Our partner sponsors not only serve as advisers, but also invest their relationship capital and proactively champion their protégées. Wonderful relationships have been forged as a result and, in recognizing the firm's investment in them, our women are really flourishing and taking more time to invest in their careers. ●