

A Shared Sense of Purpose

An Interview with Jessica Hough, Esq., Partner – Tax, Washington D.C., Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP

EDITORS' NOTE *Jessica Hough is a tax partner and the head of Skadden's Washington, D.C. office. She has also served as the head of the firm's D.C. Tax Group and on the Attorney Development and Women's Initiatives Committees. Her primary area of focus is transactional tax with a particular emphasis on the insurance sector. She is ranked among the nation's top tax attorneys by Chambers USA and The Legal 500 U.S. and was named the 2020 North America Tax Practice Leader of the Year by International Tax Review. Hough holds a B.B.A. and an M.B.A. from The University of Texas at Austin and a J.D. from The University of Chicago Law School.*



Jessica Hough

FIRM BRIEF *Founded in 1948, Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP and affiliates (skadden.com) is one of the world's most highly-respected law firms. Skadden has 22 offices, approximately 1,700 attorneys and more than 50 distinct areas of practice. The firm's clients include approximately 50 percent of Fortune 250 industrial and service corporations, as well as financial and governmental entities, startup companies and nonprofits.*

Both Skadden and its tax practice are consistently recognized for their leadership within the profession. What distinguishes Skadden from other top firms and tax practices?

All firms talk about their devotion to client service, but I think the way we translate that dedication into a truly collaborative effort separates us from the others. The partners at Skadden don't refer to clients as "my clients," we talk about them as "Skadden's clients" – everybody is laser-focused on working toward the best possible outcomes on their behalf. In practical terms, that means when someone comes to us with a complex problem and there isn't an obvious answer, we confer and collaborate until we can figure out a solution to the puzzle. Our shared sense of purpose in solving seemingly impossible problems for clients is very tangible and, I believe, sets us apart from other law firms.

You commit substantial time and energy to promoting diversity in the legal profession. Do you feel that law firms are doing an effective job in this area and how have Skadden's efforts to support diversity and inclusivity evolved?

Skadden has always been very focused on diversity, but the events of the past year have emphasized the need to go back to the drawing board and brainstorm about what else we can do. The firm reached out to our diverse attorneys, solicited our input, and together we discussed what else we can do to improve diversity, equity and inclusion. That conversation has helped us refine our approach. For example, we recognized that the work of recruiting diverse attorneys from law schools falls disproportionately on our current diverse associates. To ease that burden, we decided to credit attorneys with billable-hour equivalents for their efforts.

It's also very clear that in order to succeed in any law firm, you have to have meaningful opportunities to develop relationships. It's one thing to tell partners that they should form relationships with people from different backgrounds, but a structure is needed in order to help attorneys build stronger connections. You can't just say, "We expect you to go out to lunch twice a year." That doesn't do it. It has to be much more deliberate. You need to ask, "What pitches did you take them on? What matters were you responsible for getting them on? Did you introduce them to people in other offices and help them see how business development works?"

Skadden is a firm that is deeply engaged in the communities it serves. Do you feel that this is a responsibility of leading firms and will you discuss Skadden's culture of being purpose-driven?

This is an issue I feel very strongly about, and it's one of the reasons I'm very proud and thankful to have spent my career at Skadden. It's extremely important for attorneys to be involved in pro bono service. We have a specialized skill set that can make a real difference for people in need. To me, having those skills means that you have an obligation to help the underrepresented – the deep personal satisfaction is just a bonus.

I suggest to associates that they get involved in just one pro bono project, even if it's something simple, like participating in a referral clinic for four or five hours on a Saturday. You can help people for a few hours on discrete issues, without taking on cases on an ongoing basis. If you can get somebody to do that one pro bono project, they will continue to do pro bono work, because they will see the extraordinary impact just an hour or two of their time can have for somebody who, for example, is having trouble getting their disability benefits because they don't understand the process for applying. They will see how valuable their skill set can be for people in need.

It's also important for us to support this work because the generation of attorneys now joining law firms is very focused on activism and issues that affect their communities. They have a lot of options – if they don't feel like they'll have the opportunity to engage in purpose-driven work at a law firm, they're going to opt to work somewhere else. If we aspire to continue to attract and retain the brightest people from a diverse pool of candidates, having a culture, as I sincerely believe we have at Skadden, of being engaged in our communities is doubly important. We need to do more than just talk about our commitment – we have to demonstrate it in our actions, our programs and our support.

What advice do you offer young people beginning their careers in the profession during this challenging and unprecedented time?

Nobody has a manual for how we get through this time, and uncertainty is really hard on people. We like predictability; we like knowing what's going to happen. It's important to emphasize that, even in this unprecedented time, we have a lot of legal work to do. Attorneys who are beginning their careers should show the kind of engagement and intensity of effort they would hope to demonstrate at any other time. That said, this is also a time to try to be more flexible, try to give each other a little more grace. One thing we've learned over the past year is that people have different thresholds for dealing with the ongoing adversity. Sometimes people may need more help, which is completely normal, and we should be giving them all the support they need. One silver lining to the challenges of the past year is that our shared experience has cultivated greater empathy and understanding. ●