

Office Snapshot: DLA Piper Gets Tech Look In Silicon Valley

By James Mills

Law360 (March 7, 2024, 4:32 PM EST) -- Stepping inside DLA Piper's Silicon Valley shop in Stanford Research Park, one could easily mistake the space for the office of a tech business instead of a law firm.

The 52,000-square-foot office that opened last fall — at less than half the size of the firm's prior location in Palo Alto, Calif. — features high ceilings with exposed pipes and metal beams, a pingpong table and foosball table in the break room, and an interior pergola for secretarial space.

Expansive glass walls allow natural light to seep into the interior portions of the office, and there's even a bocce ball court outside.

"You can see from the design that it is decidedly not law-firm-like. It looks more like a techy space," said Victoria Lee, managing partner of the Palo Alto office and the firm's co-managing partner for Northern California.

The design reflects "our commitment to Silicon Valley" and "the types of clients that we work with: very tech-centric, life science-type clients," Lee said.

Adopting a creative office design was done in large part to help the office's primary clients — tech firms — feel at home, according to Frank Ryan, DLA Piper's global co-chair, global co-CEO, and Americas chair.

"Palo Alto is, as Northern California is, one of the most important geographies for our clients and the direction of our firm. Having new space like this sends another message into the marketplace about how important Palo Alto is," Ryan said.

"I think this really is reflective of what we want our image to be in this part of the world," Ryan added.



DLA Piper uses a more creative approach to designing its Palo Alto, Calif., office to help tech companies, its primary clients, feel more at home. (Courtesy of DLA Piper)



The conference room at DLA Piper's new Palo Alto office looks nothing like a standard law firm conference room. (Courtesy of DLA Piper)

The office represents DLA Piper's first new Palo Alto office in nearly two decades, but its roots go back even further to 1969, when the office was founded by Ware & Freidenrich LLP. That firm was one of the original law firms serving Silicon Valley tech firms, even before the name "Silicon Valley" was coined.

In 1993, Ware & Freidenrich merged with Gray Cary Ames & Frye to become Gray Cary Ware & Freidenrich. In 2005, that new firm was part of a triple merger with Baltimore-based Piper Rudnick LLP and London-based DLA LLP, which formed DLA Piper.

"It's a new office, but truly not a new story for DLA. Our legacy institutions have been here since the '60s," Ryan said. "We have been one of the top venture and tech business firms in the world. Emanating from here, that thread of technology has been driven through every corner of the firm."

THE LEADERS

The Palo Alto office has been helmed by its current leaders since early 2020, when Lee became the managing partner and Carrie Williamson became deputy managing partner.

A transactions attorney, Lee has been with the firm for 30 years, having joined Gray Cary in 1994. Williamson, a patent attorney, has been with the firm for 20 years since starting as an associate with Gray Cary in 2004.

The symbolism of them running an important office like Palo Alto is not lost on Lee or Williamson.

"It's important to show the next generation that it's a common thing to see women in leadership positions," said Williamson. "When I started in 2004 at Gray Cary, I don't recall women leaders within the office or in the firm. There certainly were various women who were mentors to me, but not necessarily in leadership positions. The fact that now that we have two leaders, not just in our office, but in practice groups and offices throughout the firm, is really valuable to showing other people the way, whether it's women associates or not."

Lee sees it as another sign of the evolving times.

"As a firm, I think it shows our commitment to providing role models for the next generation of lawyers. We want to have women in positions of leadership," Lee said. "It's also reflective of what I think is the general population of lawyers. There are more women going to law school. There are more women lawyers practicing."

While many clients, especially those in the tech sector, are insisting on visible evidence of diversity, equality and inclusion efforts from the companies they do business with, Ryan said that didn't really factor into the appointments of Lee and Williamson.

"We don't look at the usual suspects only for leadership roles. We make sure we are thoughtful about people who can really lead. Too often, you just go with the usual suspects. That's not what we're going after," Ryan said. "These two women and the practice they have and the way they lead are examples of that."



Victoria Lee



Carrie Williamson

THE LOCATION

DLA Piper's new office at 3203 Hanover St. is a couple of miles from Stanford University and in "a community of and for people who seek to invent the future," according to the website for Stanford Research Park. Other businesses in the park include Tesla, HP and Google, the website shows.

Before moving to the space in October, the firm's Palo Alto attorneys and other staff worked for almost 20 years in the University Circle complex a few miles away, near the 101 Freeway.

With the new location, the firm cut its office size from 120,000 square feet to 52,000 square feet. The previous office did not use space efficiently, and some individual offices were excessively large, according to Lee.

The individual offices in the new space are more uniform, Lee said. And hoteling — most attorneys and staff not having a permanent desk, but taking whatever desk is available that day — is standard, she said.

Even though DLA Piper still allows hybrid working, more attorneys and staff seem to be coming into the office since the move, Lee said.

"We have people tell us they are much more inclined to come into the office because it's a nice place to come to," she said.

The comments the office leaders receive about the space are overwhelmingly positive, Williamson said — but one common remark was a bit unexpected.

"A comment I hear from people is, 'It's a calm space,'" Williamson said.

"We work in very challenging environments a lot of times. The fact we've created a calm, collaborative space to host our clients, our contacts, our friends, our alumni is really valuable," she added.

THE TEAM

Total Number of People in the Office: 138

Total Number of Attorneys: 70

Partners: 38

Of Counsel: 3

Associates: 29

Business Professionals: 62

Other Staff: 6

THE WORK

Work for tech firms makes up the vast majority of the business in DLA Piper's Palo Alto office.

"Representing clients who are on the cutting edge of developing the technology, using the technology, and that includes from an [intellectual property] perspective, litigation perspective, regulatory perspective, [is what this office does]," Ryan said. "Technology really is at the heart of what the firm has been doing for a long time."

Williamson noted that the predecessor firms were giants in the corporate area and had a long and rich history of handling private equity, venture capital and mergers and acquisitions work, as well as intellectual property work for large tech companies and small startups. Additionally, Lee noted that as client needs have evolved, the Palo Alto office has developed a strong employment practice and a solid real estate and tax practice.

"We are a global law firm that services clients that are based not only here, but around the country, and they're expanding their businesses internationally earlier and earlier in their life cycle," Lee said. "When you're looking at the startups that are entrepreneurs getting their first company off the ground, tech has enabled them to expand their business beyond the U.S. borders, almost from the inception. Firms like ours that have this deep, rich history in representing startups are now being able to do that on a global scale."

An outgrowth of the firm's tech work is that DLA Piper and the Palo Alto office will soon be known for working with artificial intelligence, according to Ryan.

"We're a leader in AI. There's no firm that's positioned like we are," Ryan said. "That's a practice that is getting more and more integrated throughout our business."

COMINGS AND GOINGS

The Palo Alto office is a fairly stable office, with few turnovers. But there have been some notable arrivals in the past year or so.

In January 2023, corporate attorney Gurpreet Bal joined the office as a partner from Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman LLP. He represents technology companies on corporate and securities matters throughout their business life cycle.

Two months later, intellectual property attorney Christopher Eide came aboard at the office as a partner. He was part of a team of 30 IP attorneys who joined DLA Piper from Dentons.

--Editing by Linda Voorhis.