

From the San Francisco Business Times:

<https://www.bizjournals.com/sanfrancisco/news/2021/10/08/executive-profile-dean-fealk.html>

Executive Profile: Dean Fealk on how his travels made him a more empathetic communicator with clients

Oct 8, 2021, 5:00am PDT

A glance at Dean Fealk's resume reveals a well-traveled man whose experiences run the gamut from teaching at UC Hastings to serving as the national co-chair of lawyers for Joe Biden in early 2020 and representing the state of California on international trade and investment missions. Fealk is a managing partner at DLA Piper, one of the world's leading business law firms, counseling companies large and small on international transactional and regulatory matters. But his passion is not limited to the legal system. Fealk also advises politicians on public policy related to economics and business and has advised three U.S. presidential campaigns. While business has been booming for Fealk as a result of the pandemic, life in



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many ways has slowed its pace, allowing the 49-year-old to spend more quality time with his family.

Dean Fealk, DLA Piper LLP Managing Partner, poses for a portrait at the DLA Piper offices in San Francisco, California on Monday, August 30, 2021.

What brought you to the Bay Area?

I've been here on and off since 1994. I had the opportunity to visit during college, and I just fell in love with the Bay Area and the free thinking lifestyle and also was very interested in Asia. So being on the West Coast seemed like it was going to be a terrific place to raise a family and have a career.

Where else have you lived? I went to graduate school in London and I took a year off from law school to spend time in East Asia as a Fulbright scholar in Korea. And I went to China and Japan and some other countries. And then after law school, I actually started my career as a lawyer in East Asia. My claim to fame was that I was the first American to clerk at the Constitutional Court of Korea, as a Fulbright scholar.

What are some lessons learned from living abroad and how have they shaped you? I think it's always important to be open-minded to new ideas and other people's viewpoints. I think that gives you a bigger, better appreciation for what it's like not to be in the majority group. Asia generally is such an extremely dynamic part of the world economy. So for me, it's just incredibly rich and interesting and it's not monolithic. Being in Korea or Japan or China is incredibly, incredibly dynamic. I think I've taken with me the energy and hopefully a greater appreciation for a broader set of viewpoints when thinking about how our clients are doing business in Asia and how some of the cultural dimensions of what they do in terms of the environment they're operating in.

If you had to describe DLA Piper to someone, what is your pitch?

Here in the Bay Area, many of our clients — long before Covid but the environment with Covid has really accelerated this trend dramatically — are moving across borders very quickly in their life cycle and very fluidly. They need a law firm that can really help them achieve their goals in many different markets. We believe that we have probably one of the most sophisticated global offerings of any law firm. We're also one of the very, very few global law firms that really is technology-focused. We have tech in our DNA. We

represent mature public companies and many household names — we represent half of the Fortune 100. But you can't be a tech-focused law firm if you're not willing to represent emerging growth companies, venture-backed companies. So we do it and we've always done it.

How many people do you oversee and what does the future hold for DLA Piper? So we are about 70 lawyers in San Francisco, and total staff is about 105 people. Leading up to Covid, we were one of the fastest-growing offices at the firm, and we've added a few since then. So we think this is one of the most important markets for the firm. We are going to continue to grow in San Francisco and I should say in Northern California, because we also have a substantial office in Palo Alto and a smaller office in Sacramento. Growth is definitely in our future.

How have your clients' needs changed in the wake of the pandemic? The biggest change is the explosion of technology adoption and the shift to a more distributed workforce. Business is moving more quickly for many of our clients with respect to day-to-day operations, but also for their major corporate events. They're having acquisitions and exits more quickly and it seems they are heading towards the public markets more quickly. So it's an extremely dynamic time in the life of many of our clients. They have more demand than ever, they are more focused than ever, but it's also in some ways uncharted territory in terms of how to navigate the environment that we're in.

What inspired you to choose this career path? Growing up in the Midwest, I saw lawyers as people in the community who really had a seat at the table and were impactful in their communities. I really had a high admiration for lawyers where I grew up, but I wanted to see a bigger world. I was interested in doing something international and I always loved politics. I had interned in the state Senate in Michigan and for state Sen. Jackie Vaughn. He was not only the author of our local civil rights legislation in Michigan, but for his generation — he had gone to Oxford University — very worldly. He strongly encouraged me to go see the world, to go abroad to be a part of a bigger world. So I guess in a nutshell, I really thought it would be empowering to be a lawyer and to have a

seat at the table, a voice. I really love all things politics and policy, and I want to be part of an international conversation.

If you could invite three politicians for dinner, who would you want to host? I think Bill Clinton is so amazing. I would love to have him over for a conversation. Of all the administration alumni that I've met with, Jim Baker, former secretary of State, is so stunningly brilliant and has such extraordinary stories about our role in the fall of the Berlin Wall. So I would say Jim Baker and Bill Clinton for sure. And the late George Shultz, who unfortunately passed away. You know, in recent memory he was such an extraordinary American. So the three of them, I think, would be a pretty incredible political discussion.

How has the pandemic changed your routine? I'm an early riser just by my nature and I love to get up early and get my workout in and read the news, or listen to the news. In the era of Covid, it seems like I can do that. The consistency of that is even greater because I'm not having to think as much about where I might need to be that day. My hobbies now are mostly my kids' interests. My little guy is absolutely obsessed with the solar system. So we are constantly building planets out of papier-mâché and Styrofoam. My daughter loves biographies, so we've read through Covid, together, something like 53 biographies.

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