



**Donna Wilson**  
MANATT (LOS ANGELES)

# DONNA WILSON

BY KATRINA DEWEY

## THE THING ABOUT DONNA WILSON IS

you don't know what just hit you. Blue-collar to her toes, behind her open and engaged demeanor are an incisive intelligence and savvy earned from a lifetime overcoming obstacles and earning it the hard way. The native of Southern New Jersey wanted to enter the foreign service, but learned that a security clearance wasn't an option then for someone who's openly gay. So on to law school, where she got her degree from the University of Virginia while working her way through. She practiced in Washington, D.C., before moving to Los Angeles and then joining Manatt six years ago.

To those who don't know her, it may have been a surprise that Manatt selected the relatively recent lateral as its CEO. To those who do know her, nothing amazing is a surprise.

Wilson sees her job as setting Manatt up for continued success in the new and evolving law and consulting worlds. She knew from her extensive litigation and regulatory work that clients are looking for more from their law firms than they once did. She's made it her mission to position Manatt as a professional services firm of the future - able to address a wider range of client needs through a hybridized model offering clients legal, strategic, and business advisory services in an integrated team. The firm - known particularly for its work in healthcare; technology; media and entertainment; financial services; and real estate - has embraced this approach full throttle, broadening its capabilities and continuing to expand an internal culture that fosters diversity, inclusion, and creativity.

In addition to being the CEO and managing partner of the firm, Wilson co-leads Manatt's privacy and data security practice and is a partner in its financial services litigation and enforcement practice.

**Lawdragon:** It's been more than a year since you were elected, and four or five months now since you officially became chair of Manatt. Give us your analysis on the state of Manatt as we enter the new decade.

**Donna Wilson:** Well first, I love the firm. And I love my new job. Since taking over, my appreciation for my colleagues has only grown. Since my being elected, we as a firm have sought to accelerate changes that we were already undertaking to best serve our clients in meeting the challenges they face in a rapidly changing world. First, we changed our operating structure to reflect a more formalized industry and cross-industry facing approach.

We now have six industry facing groups - healthcare, financial services, digital and technology, entertainment and media, as well as a cross-industry group comprised of practice areas such as labor and employment, government, advertising and consumer, and white-collar that are industry agnostic. We understand that our clients want from their legal and business advisors not just a skill set, but also a deep industry expertise. We believe organizing along industry lines fosters collaboration among our industry experts - whether in litigation, transactional, regulatory, or consulting - and produces optimal results for our clients.

Second, we are in the process of expanding the consulting and business advisory side of the business across our platform. Currently we have over 150 consultants and advisors working in four of our six industry and cross-industry groups, and we want to both broaden and deepen that expansion. Our clients tell us that with the rapid changes in technology, business, and regulation, the challenges they face require multi-faceted advice that often cannot be obtained from a monoline or solely consulting or law firm. Our hybridized and integrated business model seeks to meet that demonstrated client need.

Third, we are acutely aware that our clients are looking for legal, business, and other advisors who are able to not just identify challenges but also provide pragmatic legal and business solutions, often in the context of a multi-disciplinary team approach. We are focused on continuing to grow and bring on talent that is best suited to helping clients navigate business and legal problems in a different way.

Leading these changes with me is a new generation of Manatt leadership across our structure that reflects our strong talent pipeline. In fact, with the new operating structure, over one third of our new leadership identifies as female and/or diverse. All in all, it's been quite busy and exciting here at Manatt, and we are energized for the future and developing new and unique ways of serving our clients.

**LD:** What accomplishments are you most proud of?

**DW:** It's still very early in my tenure, but my colleagues embracing the vision of the Manatt of the future and working so hard to begin achieving it has really been amazing. Every time I visit one of our offices I hold an office-wide meeting to discuss, among other things, strategic goals and the status of our implementing those goals. Basically I want to make sure that everyone across

# NOTWITHSTANDING ALL THE CHANGES, I'M VERY LUCKY AND VERY BLESSED TO HAVE COLLEAGUES, PARTICULARLY MY SENIOR PARTNERS, WHO HAVE EMBRACED THE CHANGES, WITH AN EYE TOWARD THE LEGACY THAT THEY'RE GOING TO LEAVE BEHIND.

the firm, from administrative assistants to senior partners and managing directors, knows and understands why we are making certain changes, how, and on what schedule, because everyone at Manatt has an important role to play in achieving our objectives.

Someone actually asked me recently during one of these, "What is your proudest accomplishment? What are you most proud of during this period?" And I said, "I'm most proud of all of you." The reason I said that was because change is always hard. Even positive change. Yet, our firm has a culture that is so perfect for this moment in time, where the entire country is changing, the economy is changing, our clients are undergoing change. So we are changing with it.

The reaction I get from everyone is, "What can I do to help you? How can I help you?" I get that all the time. Whether it's business professional staff, associates, consultants, advisors, or partners and directors. The changes we are making are consistent with our primary strategic goal of continually evolving to best serve the needs of our clients. It makes for a very exciting time, because everybody is sharing in this excitement about what we're heading toward. We're all working toward it together.

**LD:** Can you talk a little about some of the challenges that have surprised you and how you've dealt with that?

**DW:** I continue to actively represent our clients, but necessarily have stepped back a little bit from the practice, which has been an interesting experience for me personally. I love my clients and I love practicing the business of law. Frankly more of what I do as a privacy and data security lawyer is actually probably more on the consulting side than on the pure legal side. I definitely miss working with clients full time but with my colleagues I continue to help identify issues and develop creative and pragmatic solutions. But it's also given my more junior colleagues opportunities to step up and to step into client relationships. That's been really wonderful to

see, since I'm a big believer in training and mentoring and growing from within. I think that generally speaking, thus far the challenges that I thought I would encounter have not occurred. Because together as a firm we identified our strategic goals, we as a firm have gotten behind implementing the key areas of change needed to accomplish those goals. I feel very supported and I'm extremely fortunate to have been selected to lead all of us into this new chapter.

I'm also very lucky that Manatt is so unique. We're the un-firm. I have all these colleagues who just temperamentally are not lock-step kind of people, rather, they think differently and they think outside the box. It makes a difference.

**LD:** How does that translate into recruiting? You were recruited to the firm six, seven years ago. What has stayed the same in terms of why you joined the firm, and what do you think has improved that could be exciting to those considering joining Manatt today?

**DW:** There's no question in talking to lateral candidates that they're looking for something different. There are so many firms with an ethos of "bigger is better." That's not our path. We're focused. We strive to make client service - whether in law, business advisory, consulting, and the like - the hallmark of our firm in the industries and areas in which we practice.

We also strive to maintain the best parts of our culture. Which is not dog eat dog. We have lives outside of work. We're not defined entirely by it. We really do try to follow an ethos of "don't speak ill of thy colleagues and partners." I think it's a very caring firm and an integral part of our success is that we are very focused on the personal and professional success of the individual, as well as on giving back to the community, whether through pro bono or community service. You can be your true self at Manatt. That can often be hard to find.

In addition, developing our organic talent is a top priority for me and for Manatt as a whole. I started working at law firms when I was barely out of my teens as a law clerk, and have been fortunate to be able to work my way up to my current position, learning all along the way from friends and mentors. My goal is for every junior level professional in our firm to have those opportunities and experiences, as well as more formalized training and development to prepare everyone for the future of professional services and best position them to serve client needs.

**LD:** A lot of law firm leaders are seeing more challenging times ahead. How are you planning for that?

**DW:** As always we're careful in how we invest in growth, including in hiring. For example, we've had really great success with lateral recruitment, and we'll continue to do that. But I always tell my colleagues that if we want simply to multiply our gross revenues and our size, we could do that with the snap of a finger. Go out and hire people and books of revenue. That's not what we're doing. It's not what we want. It's a curated process. Most importantly, although a book of revenue is certainly a data point, we try to recruit for people with a demonstrated ability to build teams and collaborate with others to serve our clients.

We also look at everybody as being interconnected. My joke is that if we meet a lateral candidate, I look at our platform, and when the candidate has enough contacts for the platform or overlaps with our platform to fill a BINGO card, I say, "BINGO, you're hired."

I'm half joking, but it really is true. Our view is that we have an operating structure that is interrelated in a lot of respects. It helps build strength. When folks come in you can very clearly see where they connect to the different points on the platform. The more points at which they connect, the higher the chances for success. And most importantly, that interconnection enables us to provide a suite of interconnected services to our clients in a unique way.

**LD:** You're in the midst of a historic move in Los Angeles from the West Olympic corridor to Century City. How's that going, and how's it going to reflect the future?

**DW:** I'm very excited about the new space. Your question is perfect because in designing this space, we wanted to make a statement as to who we are and where we're going. The new space is designed to make it easy for our teams to collaborate, to engage with each other and with the firm, and most importantly to utilize cutting edge technology to best serve our clients.

We will be unveiling the new space after our March 2020 move, and our architects tell us that there will be no similar space by a professional services firm in Century City. Essentially we are going to have a great degree of communal space, with a staircase through it that we call the "hive." It's intended to be the heart of our firm. The elevators meet there, the internal stairs are there, the central hallways are there. And then around the internal staircase will be over 5000 square feet of communal space, in addition to collaborative space and technology throughout our five floors. It really represents a new way of working - we have to work like our clients increasingly do, not like a traditional law or consulting firm often does. There are many more exciting things about the new space, and I'm looking forward to sharing more details with you and the Lawdragon audience once it's unveiled.

**LD:** It sounds a little emblematic of you that, while sleek and well designed, you're not just another space. Your leadership has a soul, you're a person, and you're not just looking for the next nice sleek package with your book of business.

**DW:** Thank you, I would tend to agree with you on that. It's definitely going to be a little different, and I don't think it's such a bad thing to be known as the professional services firm that gave up the boardroom for a surfboard room.

It's a different kind of law firm, and a different kind of professional services firm. The reason, frankly, that I wanted to take this position was to ensure that we kept these good things. Because having been at other firms, and coming to Manatt, I recognized fairly quickly that this culture and this soul and spirit, you don't find easily. It's an increasing rarity.

**LD:** I think that's one of the most telling things about your selection and where it sounds like the firm is today, which is, you dare to be different. Think different. Lead different.

**DW:** I love that. That really does embody a lot of it. I think the clients are tired of the same old, same old. Since Manatt is as open-minded as it is, our people are willing to do things that are different.

I want us to be differentiated in every possible way. I'm very lucky because I am at a firm that from the beginning welcomed my differences, and believed in my differences. I want others to have a similarly good experience as we move into the future.

When you talk to people, that's what they're looking for: something different. Because there are 200 places they could go to and they would all generally be the same. So yes, we dare to be different.