

# THE AMERICAN LAWYER

An ALM Publication

americanlawyer.com

SEPTEMBER 2015

## LIFETIME ACHIEVERS

*Our 12th annual awards honor lawyers whose remarkable careers have shaped the legal profession.*

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### ROBERT DELL | Latham & Watkins

ROBERT DELL, 62, WHO STEPPED DOWN AS LATHAM & WATKINS' chairman in January, could have played it safe two decades ago when, at age 43, he was elected the firm's youngest leader.

Latham had just undergone unprecedented turbulence sparked by the 1990 collapse of its biggest investment banking client, Drexel Burnham Lambert. His predecessor, Jack Walker, had responded by cutting scores of associates and moving to a more reward-driven compensation system.

But Dell charted a bolder course. He "came in and calmed those waters," says K&L Gates chair Peter Kalis, a longtime admirer, "and then started moving forward and embracing risk."

Over the next 20 years, Dell oversaw the quadrupling of firm head count, from 518 to 2,100, and a tripling of offices, from 11 to 33. Net income increased 11 times over, and profits per partner grew nearly twice as fast as the Am Law 100 average, establishing the firm as the most nimble and upwardly mobile in the top tier. In Dell's final year, the firm boasted double-digit revenue increases, displacing DLA Piper at the top of The Am Law 100, only the fourth firm in the ranking's 30-year history to climb to the top. Dell's legacy, says longtime friend and former Morrison & Foerster chair Keith Wetmore, "is having cemented a place for Latham at the very high end of the profession, at a tier that is very hard to break into and have it stick."

The firm had already leveraged a market-leading high-yield finance practice to build a competitive presence in New York; Dell believed Europe was the next step. In a pattern he would repeat, he studied the question, enlisting outside consultants to help determine whether the firm could succeed. The consultants' answer, a year later, was a resounding "yes." Armed with the report, Dell spent a year crisscrossing the firm's offices, meeting with partners one-on-one. Dell's

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efforts paid off: Consensus was reached. "Partners owned that decision," says Dell's successor, William Voge. Despite initial bumps and an investment of at least \$100 million over several years, there was little of the second-guessing that plagued others' globalization efforts; the firm's global presence exploded.

With similar partner backing, Dell also jump-started the firm's once anemic pro bono program. The firm now invests \$100 million annually, and lawyers spend more than 90 hours a year on average, on pro bono matters.

Fellow partners say Dell was attentive to preserving Latham's nonhierarchical culture, which balances performance with team orientation. He has turned down rainmaking lateral candidates who didn't embrace Latham's culture, he says.

As Dell's stature in the legal community grew, colleagues say he never lost his humility. His approach to firm succession—giving Latham plenty of notice, then stepping off the stage into retirement—best reflects this. "I wanted to get out of the way," he explained last year, "to let that person create his own successes." —JULIE TRIEDMAN

DREW KELLY