

# Being a Successful Black Attorney



By Robert A. Robertson with Dechert LLP

I am a partner in the financial services group at Dechert and chair of the firm's Black Professionals Alliance (BPA), Dechert's Black affinity group. The BPA includes the firm's Black attorneys and, as of last year, also our Black business services professionals. The BPA focuses on mentoring, nurturing and supporting Black professionals at the firm.

Early in my legal career, I was interested in financial services. I have always enjoyed finance and a legal practice counseling financial institutions that, in turn, help everyday Americans save

for the future – for important financial goals like buying a home, saving for kids to attend college, and having enough money for retirement.

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As an African American lawyer, the early days in "big

law" were challenging. In 1987, I graduated from UCLA Law School and joined a top firm based in Los Angeles. Before I arrived, there were no other Black attorneys at the firm. As a first-year associate, I was assigned a well-meaning partner mentor; however, he made it clear that if I did not pass the bar on the first attempt, the firm did not plan to hire any more Black attorneys. I did pass the bar, but of course there were more challenges. As a sign of the times, the prestigious private club across the street did not allow women members until June of that year, and LA's

most celebrated country club would not let Blacks join for another four years.

Nevertheless, I enjoyed my tenure at the firm where I began, and the training helped me to be successful later when I joined the staff of the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) in D.C., where I was an attorney in the Division of Investment Management. I was fortunate to work with many dedicated staff professionals. This was when Arthur Levitt was chair of the SEC. I learned a lot from Chairman Levitt, such as how to build a consensus on difficult regulatory issues, and the benefits of “pre-meetings.”

Post the SEC, I have been with Dechert now for more than 20 years. As a partner in the financial services group, my practice continues to emphasize investment management, especially retail financial products. My identity as an African American lawyer informs my professional approach. I reflect on regulatory policy and how it affects average families; this gives me a broad framework as I approach regulatory issues. I also am a lecturer at the USC Gould School of Law, where my securities regulation class includes regulatory policy. I’ve divided the curriculum into two levels of analysis: first, the students learn the law; then the students and I discuss what “should be the law,” which is much more difficult.

My life experience has in-

stilled in me an obligation and joy to advise young lawyers of color – really anyone who may be new to a big law environment. This includes first generation professionals and female attorneys. My door is always open. We talk about everything from the importance of “client service” to managing the demands of senior attorneys, to paying off student loans.

My life experience furthermore informs my pro bono

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work of assisting the Legal Resource Center South Africa (LRC), a South African public interest law firm which had its roots in representing Nelson Mandela. Attorneys at Dechert have devoted hundreds of hours to assisting the LRC. Dechert’s current work with the LRC focuses on farm worker rights and women’s rights.

Along with my day-to-day work at Dechert, chairing the Black Professionals Alliance – BPA – has provided me with another opportunity to assist other Black professionals. My

work with the affinity group will help develop talent at the firm and builds on the great work of Vince Cohen, the prior chair of the group and the firm’s current Global Managing Partner.

The BPA strives for enhanced professional development and advancement of Black lawyers and business services professionals. We also support the firm’s efforts in recruiting and retaining Black legal talent. Along with these efforts, the group promotes the Black community (“family”) within the firm through, among other activities, sponsoring cultural events and networking opportunities. The group collaborates with the other firm affinity groups to foster an inclusive culture within Dechert. Current examples of BPA activities include member meetings where we highlight accomplishments of the group, junior attorney training, mid-level/senior attorney training, summer associate programs, new associate programs and Black History Month programs in the U.S. and the UK.

At Dechert and other large law firms, my vision is an environment where we continue to celebrate diverse backgrounds. Dechert is an international law firm, and we always perform better when we appreciate and celebrate the differences of our many talented professionals. Our diversity will drive positive change. **PDJ**