

How Mayer Brown Is Shaking Up Early Career Networking

By **Andrea Keckley**

Law360 (October 30, 2024, 10:41 AM EDT) -- For many lawyers in the earlier stages of their careers, activities like networking and business development don't come naturally. But with Mayer Brown LLP's NextGen platform, they may not have to.

This month, the firm announced that New York would be the next city to gain access to NextGen, a platform it first created in London in 2018 to connect junior lawyers, clients and other associated professionals.

Individuals who sign up to join the online network are invited to converse, share ideas and attend NextGen-hosted events ranging from cocktail hours and musical performances to talks from influential figures in business, media, sports and more.

"When we first launched, we made it clear that it wouldn't be [including] partners, and so they didn't have the worry of their own senior boss being there ... and feeling restricted by them," London-based senior associate Hannah Cartwright told Law360 Pulse. "It's a very free, friendly atmosphere. It doesn't feel like formal networking at all."

NextGen eventually expanded into Paris and other parts of Europe before Washington, D.C., became its first U.S. location in 2022.

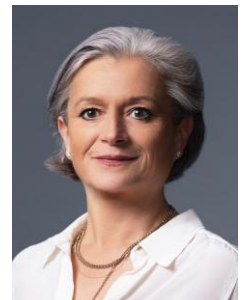
"It's hard to believe that I sent an email about NextGen nearly seven years ago, and from that, the initiative has evolved and been rolled out internationally," James Morris, who was an associate when he came up with the idea for NextGen, told Law360 Pulse in an email. "At its core, it was designed to provide a platform for associates to grow their careers and collaborate with their contemporaries at clients and intermediaries. It also creates valuable talking points with clients, helping us deepen relationships by getting to know their next generation and ensuring the longevity of those relationships."

Partner Sally Davies, a London-based management committee member who helped launch NextGen, said she noticed how it sometimes seemed less common in the United States for associates to be heavily involved in business development.

"I think there is a tendency in niche markets to work in silos, and that hierarchy can become really important," Davies told Law360 Pulse. "And [NextGen] kind of ignores it."



Sydni Eibschutz



Sally Davies



Hannah Cartwright

As NextGen arrived in Chicago in 2023, Mayer Brown tapped fourth-year associate Sydni Eibschutz to head a New York launch.

"I was just so excited to bring it to New York," she told Law360 Pulse.

Here, Eibschutz, Davies and Cartwright discuss the firm's vision for NextGen and the effect it has had both internally and on clients.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

What made now a good time to expand NextGen to New York?

Eibschutz: I actually had not heard of [NextGen] at all until the Paris managing partner [Jean-Philippe Lambert] came in [and] talked to me about it.

This was back in August 2023. He told me that the Chicago inaugural event was coming up and asked me if I wanted to spearhead the initiative in New York. I thought it was an incredible idea. And then I actually went to the Chicago initiative, and it was unlike anything that I had experienced.

Networking is sometimes thought of as something that can reinforce existing hierarchies. Why do you think NextGen can offer a better approach?

Davies: The reason we started [NextGen] was to try and really break down that hierarchy and encourage junior people to do [business development] and give them a platform to do that as a cross-office group, so they're not blocked by more senior people who might be more hierarchical in their approach.

So one of the motivations for it was to help with succession planning [and] to widen and deepen those client relationships. And by doing that at the junior level both internally and with clients, I think we just ignored that hierarchical thing.

Eibschutz: I feel like networking was always something that I really wanted to work on, and I wanted to grow my network, but it felt like it was such a daunting task, and I felt like my only options were really to stand awkwardly next to a managing partner while they're schmoozing with their friends who are the managing directors of some banks, and I had this fear that I would say something stupid or look dumb. And then I felt like my other option was to cold call my clients and ask them for drinks, which was always something that I inevitably would chicken out of doing.

So I feel like what NextGen really has done is create this stress-free, relaxed environment for people to just network [and] meet new people across a wide variety of practice groups. That's something that's really important to us.

Cartwright: Also, it gives us a chance to create events that we think our peer groups will find interesting and topics that we're interested in talking about. And I think it's not the same thing for clients at junior level; it's quite daunting for them to go and do [business development], and this makes it easier for them as well.

What kind of feedback have you gotten from attorneys who have used the platform since its launch?

Davies: The feedback has been consistent in the creation of this safe environment without the fear of

senior people being there and without having to feel like you're doing the traditional business development of being a junior person in the room with a lot of senior people.

That is the feedback that we've certainly had, which is why I was so keen to support translating it into the U.S. and other markets. I think Brazil [is] really well-progressed with their NextGen initiative as well. And so the key feedback, from my perspective, is that it's well-received by the clients.

Cartwright: We've had lots of feedback from the clients, saying they really appreciate us running a network like this, where it allows the teams to form much wider. You might ordinarily have had a [general counsel] that has a really good relationship with a senior partner, but their teams never really got together. We've had lots of really great feedback recently saying it's great to see an initiative that allows you to strengthen those relationships top to bottom, basically, and see those grassroots relationships build up throughout the teams.

How has this initiative evolved as factors like the COVID-19 pandemic change the way we work with one another?

Sally Davies: It was a real struggle in terms of keeping a network going during the pandemic. We did things like virtual quizzes and online events. As part of trying to keep in touch with all our client contacts when we couldn't see them, we started a podcast series. That was started [during] COVID.

For a year, I think, we were working on picking different topics. That started in London, but it was one person from the NextGen community with a speaker.

We did those series of podcasts to keep engagement going because we really missed socializing and networking in London when COVID was on, and it took a long time to come back to the office and be coming to these events. And now we finally feel like back to normal. It's just been thinking outside the box, I think, and being creative and thinking of ways to keep those networks going and those conversations going and sparking conversation via things like podcasts or whatever you can do to really get people involved.

But it was a challenging time in COVID for a few years, not being able to see everyone face-to-face. But we've adapted and learned new ways to get in touch with people.

Cartwright: You've got so much more energy and enthusiasm to come to events because people have missed them, and so we've tried really hard to make them mindful, thoughtful, really positive, very inclusive.

We try and make them really diverse, so that we appeal to everybody. Lots of things that don't just involve a drinks party and the training stuff, the leadership interaction — and we found that that has been so much more positive post-COVID just because people have been starved of social events and meeting in bigger groups. So I think we've managed to take advantage of that, as people have been much, much more engaged in coming back to the office and really wanting to go to social things.

--Editing by Jay Jackson Jr.