

Q&A With Heather Oden: Ball Janik's COO on the Role Legal Ops Plays Today

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You at Work Spotlight

By [The Editors](#)

Attorney at Work's new "You at Work Spotlight" series focuses on the crucial role business professionals play in law firms of all sizes — including newly emerging career options in the legal industry. In our first interview, we focus on the role of the chief operating officer and the demands the pandemic has placed on legal operations.

Heather J. Oden is the Chief Operating Officer at Ball Janik, LLP, based in Portland, Oregon, where she oversees the whole gamut of the firm's business operations — finance and accounting, marketing, facilities, IT and HR — for the firm's three offices in Portland, Orlando and Miami. Oden, who sits on the firm's Management Committee and Compensation Committee, says, "My overarching goal is to maximize the value and profitability of the firm. I make sure everyone has everything they need to be on the top of their game for our clients."

Managing Legal Ops During the Pandemic

With offices on both coasts, what have been the biggest challenges of navigating the pandemic these past two years?

Heather J. Oden: Oregon and Florida have vastly different political climates, different cultural nuances and distinct local government regulations. Our biggest challenge has been human contact between the coasts, which has always helped breed collaboration and teamwork. Fortunately, I took my first trip in two years to our East Coast office this December.

Tell us about your challenges in managing the firm's operations. What lessons have you taken away from the past two years?

HJO: We have placed a significant emphasis on mental health and well-being. This year, we closed the firm for the entire week of Thanksgiving to promote wellness and encourage time away from work with family and loved ones. Knowing that stress is dangerously high, we have also increased our health-care coverage to offer employees counseling on-demand with a licensed psychologist, psychiatrist, clinical social worker or naturopaths. We also offer discounts on gym memberships and encourage everyone to get outdoors.

We work hard to address these challenges and to keep people inspired by the great work we do together and with our clients.

What type of technology investments has your firm made? What's next?

HJO: We have bolstered our cybersecurity posture and developed continuity plans to keep the firm operational in case of another disaster. We also implemented new solutions centered around security, productivity and performance, helping the firm facilitate faster data access no matter where employees work. The firm's IT systems are cloud-based. We are constantly evaluating new tools to help us work efficiently and collaborate.

Tell us about your new headquarters, designed without corner offices, and how remote work played a role in your design decisions?

HJO: Our Portland headquarters is moving to a newly redesigned office space on the 18th floor in the same building this year. We have worked carefully with LRS Architects to design an open-concept environment without corner offices to foster an inclusive, collaborative and flexible office. The open areas of the new office allow enough space for social distancing while still maintaining a collaborative and healthy environment. The new office is slightly smaller with dedicated spaces designed for working in small groups.

The redesign focuses on a mid-century modern style combined with natural aesthetics. Our design philosophy aims at encouraging ingenuity, innovation and a healthy work environment.

The future of the workplace is shifting in a post-COVID-19 world, and taking care of people remains our greatest priority. For instance, the firm has a wellness room with dimmable lights and a private place to meditate, nap or regroup. The new space has special seating with spanning views of Mount Hood or Mount St. Helens, a perfect area for a laptop and a cup of coffee. The firm also has a top-of-the-line coffee machine for all employees.

The Role of Legal Ops in Law Firms and Legal Departments

How did you find your way to legal operations as a career?

HJO: I always wanted to be like my brother. He went to law school, and I applied at law firms fresh out of school with a finance degree. I started as an assistant bookkeeper. I learned how to manage a network and worked my way up.

What is your involvement in legal ops in the legal community?

HJO: I am a member of both the Association of Legal Administrators and Corporate Legal Operations Consortium. We have relied on the many resources offered by these organizations, including attending virtual events and other continuing education platforms. We also partner with several members regularly to brainstorm in a safe space to discuss how to best address the many changes we are all facing.

What's the biggest misconception about legal ops?

HJO: People often stereotype this discipline as not fun — but it is fun and challenging! This discipline is also a game-changer for most firms. It continues to evolve by leaps and bounds, focusing on running a legal organization to increase efficiency and productivity while serving clients by applying business and technical practices. The [2021 CLOC State of the Industry Report](#), which captured responses from 200 organizations across more than 22 industries and 21 countries, revealed five buckets most legal ops departments are focusing on:

1. Data analytics
2. Knowledge management
3. Organizational design and strategic planning
4. Service delivery
5. Support models, technology, and process support

The survey results indicate there is room for growth on all fronts, and the firm will be adding more resources for optimization and improvements.

If you could provide advice to law firm leaders interested in evaluating and improving their legal operations, what would it be?

HJO: Talk to your employees and listen to them often and consistently.

FAQs: Chief Legal Operations Officer

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE TYPICAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF YOUR ROLE AS COO?

I oversee the firm's daily operations and work with internal committees to ensure an inclusive, diverse and equitable firm culture. I also work closely with the senior management team to implement business strategies, plans and procedures.

ARE THERE SPECIFIC EDUCATIONAL OR EXPERIENCE REQUIREMENTS?

Most people in my role have a degree in finance with a solid understanding of HR, IT/business infrastructure and have an aptitude in decision-making and problem-solving. They are also involved in industry-specific associations to gain continuing education and make contacts. For instance, I'm a member of the Association of Legal Administrators, the Society for Human Resource Management and the CLOC. Also, I was recently appointed to serve on the Multiple Sclerosis Society, Oregon Chapter's Board of Directors.

WHAT MAKES YOUR ROLE DIFFERENT FROM OTHER LAW FIRMS' COOS?

I am heavily focused on recruitment and retention, working with our practice groups on strategic planning, and ensuring we have the best attorneys and staff to support our growing client base. We have bi-coastal offices, and the culture is incredibly different depending on location. I lead with empathy and believe strongly that our people make the unassailable difference.

Where Is the Legal Industry Heading?

For decades it seems, the profession has been debating alternative business structures, including ownership by nonlawyers, and lately, the regulatory grounds are beginning to shift. What are your thoughts on this?

HJO: Ball Janik is an entrepreneurial and client-focused law firm. We have always embraced advances in the legal profession that better serve clients and make our business successful. Practically speaking, when we had non-attorney lobbyists, we treated them as partners to the extent permissible and necessary to stay competitive in the DC market.

Where is the legal industry going?

HJO: I overheard a conversation about how the legal industry was dying the other day. "Dying!" I exclaimed. "Legal is going to the moon. Ball Janik will have a presence with land use and real estate on the moon." We laughed, but I am serious. Lawyers are necessary and needed. Legal is solution-oriented, and this will always be needed. To succeed, however, law firms must be lean, nimble and diverse.

Where are YOU going?

HJO: We have an exceptional leadership team at Ball Janik consisting of lawyers and business professionals. Our core group has similar professional time horizons, and we are ideologically aligned and energized. We plan to continue growing the firm with our people, innovate, and evolve ahead of the profession in general. I am unsure exactly when and where the finish line is for me, but I intend to cross it with this group, and I am excited to keep running this race.

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