

# AWARDS

## CEREMONY at Irvine Marriott

November 6, 2025



### GENERAL COUNSEL AWARDS

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# Terumo Neuro: In-House Legal Team Pushes Rebranding

■ By YUIKA YOSHIDA

ALISO VIEJO — **Terumo Neuro's** in-house legal team isn't resting on its laurels.

Since winning best in-house legal team at the Business Journal's **General Counsel Awards** last year, the team has closed about 10 cases, including a class action lawsuit.

But that's not the most exciting milestone the team has accomplished, according to **Jacqueline Collins**, general counsel of Terumo Neuro.

It's been nearly a year since the Aliso Viejo-based medical device maker rebranded from MicroVention to Terumo Neuro, reflecting its desire to capture more of the neurovascular market.

"We've been expanding on that brand promise," Collins told the Business Journal.

Its parent company, Japan-based **Terumo Corp.**, has been active in acquisitions, looking at "exciting new spaces in brain health" such as smart devices and rehabilitation, she said.

They have also been more engaged with the rest of the company globally.

Terumo Neuro brought in R&D engineers from Tokyo to its newly expanded headquarters. Last year, the company acquired the former **Pacific Life Insurance Co.** building for \$42.3 million in response to increasing demand for its products.

"We have a lot of innovation that goes on here, so it's become a very attractive place for our parent company to place additional employees," Collins said.

## Cybersecurity, AI in Protecting IP

One of the company's largest legal achievements was winning a trade secrets case against competitor **Balt USA LLC** last year.

Terumo Neuro filed a lawsuit against Balt and three former employees after discovering they had taken thousands of documents containing trade secrets to start a business that competed with Terumo Neuro and sought more than \$100 million in damages.

"I think every company in the medical device industry is actively engaged in protecting intellectual property," Collins said.

Part of that means using advanced cybersecurity to protect IP, as well as newer technologies like artificial intelligence.

"There's AI that we now need to make sure we're using correctly, and that will continue to be a focus for medical device companies and medical device lawyers going forward," Collins said.

Collins said that she's a big advocate for technology to help manage data and manage things more efficiently but doesn't see it as a replacement for lawyers.

"It will 100% not replace lawyers, but it will replace lawyers who don't use AI because we'll be able to deliver those services better," she said.



General Counsel Jacqueline Collins (center) and the rest of Terumo Neuro's in-house legal team

## Mentoring Next Generation of Lawyers

The team continued to be active in the Orange County community.

Terumo Neuro's legal department welcomed two first-year law student interns from the **Association of Corporate Counsel's (ACC)** diversity program in the summer.

"I really love this new generation of lawyers," Collins said.

"In my generation, when a senior lawyer told you to do something, you just did it, but

this generation asks why, and I think that's a really good question right now. We need to explain why."

Two months ago, Terumo Neuro employees in Aliso Viejo gave back to two local nonprofits.

Employees helped pack backpacks with school supplies for local children at **Families Forward** and sorted through clothing donations at **Laura's House**, which provides shelter and support for victims of domestic violence. ■

# Beckley: Balances Litigation with Community Service

■ By NANCY LUNA

COSTA MESA — Throughout the year, **John Beckley** is representing the **Automobile Club of Southern California** in high-stakes legal matters ranging from employment law to wildfire and catastrophe subrogation.

But courtroom victories aren't the most fulfilling part of his job as head litigator. Working side-by-side this past year with the Auto Club's growing team is what he enjoyed most about his work, he says.

"The most fulfilling part of my job was the people I got to work with, from the executive team to my immediate colleagues and our recently added staff," Beckley told the Business Journal in an email.

Beckley was honored last year in the Specialty Counsel category at the Business Journal's 14th annual **General Counsel Awards**. The next event will be held on the evening of Nov. 6 at the **Irvine Marriott**.

## A Diversity of Cases

Beckley's work at the Auto Club spans nearly three decades.

He joined in 1997 and became part of the organization's first in-house litigation team.

In 2002, he was promoted to his first management role. In 2010, the Auto Club created the deputy general counsel position for him and one other colleague. He was then named head litigator three years ago.

"It's very diverse. I'm never bored," he told the Business Journal last year after winning his award. "I'm always challenged by the work."

As head of litigation, Beckley oversees all

corporate litigation for the Auto Club, with administrative offices in Costa Mesa, which includes a mix of legal matters such as class actions, representative actions, insurance, mass actions, wildfire and catastrophe subrogation and employment law.

He also manages outside counsel when partnered on complex litigation across the Auto Club's California and out-of-state footprint.

Over the years, he has led appellate teams defending the Auto Club's business models in cases that reached the **California Supreme Court**, the **U.S. Court of Appeals** and the **California Courts of Appeal**.

His past work, such as the defense of the Auto Club's battery program and installment fees, has resulted in at least 16 published cases on various legal topics over the years. This includes being one of the few attorneys in California to lead the defense in two class and representative action trials, according to the Auto Club.

Beckley says the organization's successes are rooted in teamwork.

"It is genuinely a pleasure to collaborate with a group that takes immense pride in our organization and works together with a strong sense of shared ownership and mutual respect, which makes celebrating our numerous achievements even more meaningful," he said in an email.



John Beckley, head of litigation at Automobile Club of Southern California, won a general counsel award last year

As such, the Auto Club team was recognized for its work serving customers this year.

The organization, the fourth largest private company in Orange County with 2024 revenue of \$10.6 billion, was ranked No. 1 in California for overall customer satisfaction in **J.D. Power's** U.S. Auto Insurance Study for the second consecutive year.

"I am so proud of the many dedicated employees who earned this recognition for our organization with their helpful and caring service to our insured members," President and CEO **Greg Backley** said in a statement. "The Auto Club celebrates its 125th anniversary this year, and our commitment to providing exceptional service hasn't changed."

The ranking is based on a study of auto insurance customers who were asked to rate their primary insurance companies.

"We view the J.D. Power study as a respected, meaningful benchmark, and we are pleased to see the results of the study reflect the effort we put forth to exceed our members' expectations," Backley said.

## Victories Outside the Courtroom

Outside the office, Beckley devotes significant time to pro bono and nonprofit service.

He continues to serve on the **Orange County Bar**

**Association Charitable Fund** Board of Directors, which provides legal services to underserved communities, and chairs the group's Audit Committee.

He also sits on the boards of the **California Employment Law Council** and the **Civil Justice Association of California**.

Next month, he'll be mentoring the next generation of lawyers.

On Nov. 13, he will serve as an attorney volunteer for the **Constitutional Rights Foundation's** high school moot court competition at **Orange County Superior Court**.

He says volunteering allows him "to see what's going on out there other than the Auto Club."

It also "makes me a better lawyer." ■



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# Orange County Business Journal's 2025 General Counsel Awards Winners and Nominees

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# Yashina Burns: From Healthcare Ad Tech to Media Measuring

■ By KEVIN COSTELLOE

IRVINE — **Yashina Burns** has shifted from a healthcare ad tech company to a media measurement company, “focusing even more right now on the technology side of things.”

Burns won a Business Journal Rising Star Award at the **General Counsel Awards** in 2024, when she was senior vice president for legal and privacy with New York-based **DeepIntent**.

In April, the Irvine-based lawyer joined **VideoAmp**, which she describes as a “competitor to **Nielsen**,” the legendary audience measuring company.

She also works on privacy matters, guidance and strategy from the legal sense as well

as on intellectual property and AI.

“Overall, I think the space in advertising technology tends to be like the Wild West,” Burns told the Business Journal on Sept. 24 as she looked back on the nearly year’s time passed since she won the award.

## Media Measurement, Technology

She describes VideoAmp as a “media measurement and advertising technology company” that lets agencies, brands and publishers measure and make the best use of TV, streaming and digital media. She also works on advertising matters within those areas.

VideoAmp has been growing rapidly and has more than 1,000 advertisers, according to **Amazon Web Services**, which has worked with the firm.



**Yashina Burns**  
VP, Associate General Counsel  
VideoAmp

VideoAmp is headquartered in Los Angeles with offices in New York and elsewhere across the U.S.

Burns says she works remotely from her home in Orange County and drives into Los Angeles occasionally for work.

Nielsen remains the dominant player in the space.

VideoAmp’s clients include **NBCUniversal**, **Warner Bros.** and “a lot of other powerhouse media companies,” according to Burns.

## Teaching at UCI Law School

In another step in her career, Burns has also started teaching legal research and writing at the UCI law school, where she graduated from.

“From walking these halls as a law student to now teaching in UCI Law’s LL.M. program, it’s a full circle moment to be back on campus. Grateful for the chance to support the next generation of lawyers as a professor starting this month,” she wrote on **LinkedIn**.

Burns holds a Bachelor of Arts in Law, Societies and Justice from the **University of Washington** and a JD degree from the **UCI School of Law**.

She is also on the board of the **Orange County Asian American Bar Association**. ■

# Jeffrey Shieh: Dream Job Continues at Sega of America

■ By PARIMAL M. ROHIT

IRVINE — The molecular biology student who grew up to be the general counsel of a major video game company continues to be at the forefront of the gaming and movie industries.

**Jeffrey Shieh**, recognized last year at the Business Journal’s 14th annual **General Counsel Awards** at the **Irvine Marriott** for his work as executive vice president, general counsel and head of business affairs of **Sega of America**, spent the past 10 months working on new properties.

One of those properties was the launch of “Sonic the Hedgehog 3” movie in December, with Sega partner **Paramount**.

“We are already working on the fourth movie,” Shieh told the Business Journal in an email.

Shieh was also part of the team that worked on the recent launch of “Sonic Racing: Cross-Worlds,” Sega’s latest multi-platform kart

racing video game.

He also worked on the launch of “Shinobi: Art of Vengeance” video game, marking the return of Sega’s iconic Shinobi character.

“I’m staying busy juggling a variety of matters, never a dull day here. Sega is still doing very well as our video game and transmedia businesses continue their strong growth,” Shieh said.

Shieh’s path to Sega of America was anything but a straight line. He was a molecular biology student at the **University of California, Berkeley** before moving on to the **U.C. College of Law, San Francisco**. From there, he joined the law firm **Sheppard Mullin**, where he worked for six years as an attorney.

“At some point, I decided that I wanted to work not necessarily at a law firm for the rest of my career and become a partner, but in-



**Jeffrey Shieh**  
General Counsel and Head of Business Affairs  
Sega of America

stead I wanted to try and go in-house, climb the corporate ladder to become general counsel someday,” Shieh told the Business Journal last year.

He took a job at **Edison International**, where he served as the company’s corporate governance and finance attorney. Then he transitioned into media in 2007, when Shieh joined **Evolve Media LLC**.

Shieh would move on to **Activision** and **Oak View Group** before landing at Sega of America, where he became the company’s head of legal and business affairs in 2020.

Sega of America offered Shieh an opportunity to fulfill a childhood dream.

“We’re geared toward making video games and entertaining consumers. It’s a great opportunity,” Shieh told the Business Journal after being honored at the 2024

General Counsel Awards. “You have to remember that, even when you are grinding away on a contract, what we do here is a privilege.” ■

# Jeffrey Plumer: Adding to the Legal Toolkit

■ By EMILY SANTIAGO-MOLINA

NEWPORT BEACH — When General Counsel **Jeffrey Plumer** first joined **Evolus Inc.** in what was his first in-house gig, he saw the job as an opportunity to expand his legal skillset in areas such as compliance, international contracts, product licensing and acquisitions.

Since 2014, Plumer has seen the medical aesthetics firm through its initial public offering in 2018, the launch of its flagship neurotoxin product — not without some complications on the way—and its first-ever operating profit ahead of schedule (Nasdaq: EOLS) (see list, page 18).

Plumer was vice president of legal and corporate secretary at Evolus for six years until 2020, when he was appointed general counsel. Now he oversees all legal and compliance matters for the Newport Beach company.

After Plumer won at the Business Journal’s **General Counsel Awards** in 2024, he said that each moment of growth gave him a new toolkit.

“Whether it’s a crisis, whether it’s hard times or even some of the great times,” he told the Business Journal.

Last year, Plumer said Evolus was a public company on the brink of a new part of the medical industry since he was in the middle of studying a different layer of regulation related to medical devices instead of pharmaceuticals.

## New Products

This year, the firm launched **Evolysse Form** and **Evolysse Smooth**, which refers to its injectable hyaluronic acid gels.

The first two products in the Evolysse collection received **Food and Drug Administration (FDA)** approval in February.

It is the second addition to Evolus’ product portfolio, following its first aesthetic neurotoxin product **Jeuveau**—an injection used to improve the appearance of frown lines between the eyebrows.

In 2023, Plumer negotiated with French company **Symatase Aesthetics** the licensing deal for Evolus to be the exclusive U.S. distributor of the Evolysse line of five dermal fillers.

Following the new product’s release in June, Chief Executive **David Moatzedi** said that Evolysse was outperforming the initial launch of Jeuveau and that it was “proving to be a powerful complement” in its portfolio.

Evolus also received Medical Device Regulation approval in Europe for four unique injectable hyaluronic gels under the brand name **Estyme**, expanding its presence into the global dermal filler market.

It plans to do a limited rollout of Estyme to select physicians with a broader European launch on track for the second half of 2025, according to the company.



**Jeffrey Plumer**  
General Counsel  
Evolus Inc.

Evolus anticipates Evolysse and Estyme to contribute between 8% to 10% of total sales for 2025.

The local aesthetics firm also partnered with Symatase to begin the commercial launch of Nuceiva in France this year after winning approval from the European Commission.

In August, Evolus reported second quarter results that “came in below expectations, reflecting one of the most challenging market environments we’ve seen in recent years,”

CEO Moatzedi said in an Aug. 5 earnings call.

Saying demand has weakened within the U.S. aesthetics market, the company slashed its 2025 full-year revenue guidance to \$295 million to \$305 million from an April forecast of \$345 million to \$355 million.

At press time, Evolus had a market cap of \$398 million with shares trading around \$6.15 apiece—down about 44% year-to-date. ■

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## Trade Secret Protection: An Ounce of Prevention is Worth a Pound of Cure

*Authors: Michael Katz and Victor Yu*

Katz Ruby Carle LLP specializes in trade secret litigation and counseling, an area in which one of the authors has practiced for nearly 35 years. The takeaway of this article is that an ounce of prevention is worth more than a pound of cure. Or as Sun Ztu wisely counseled: “the supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.”

Trade secret jurisprudence, unlike tax or patent law, is relatively straightforward. Most counsel know or can learn the basics of trade secret law, including what steps to preserve secrecy are sufficient to qualify business information as a trade secret, what is misappropriation, or what level of detail must be identified by the trade secret plaintiff to assert a claim or commence discovery. Identifying a company’s trade secrets and developing procedures to protect them is a normal-course business activity that creates significant value at modest expense and effort.

Nevertheless, many companies give trade secret protection short shrift. For in-house counsel, there are typically many more pressing demands, whether it be developing a patent portfolio, navigating regulatory frameworks, or managing contracts and relationships with customers or vendors. Trade secret protection, often, is treated as a “nice to have” rather than a “need to have.” Many companies assume that they can address the question of what constitute their trade secrets when, and if, they are confronted with an actionable instance of theft.

In the view of the authors, this is a mistake—it misunderstands the risks and gets the priorities backwards. One can achieve the ounce of prevention required without having to set aside additional resources. Instead of approaching trade secret protection as a separate project, it can be treated as an overlay on preexisting in-house counsel activities. For example, in the context of a patent program, one can identify what intellectual property is more suited for trade secret protection than patenting. The resulting dialog with participating employees can shape their understanding of what is valuable, spurring more initiative, and reminding employees of their confidentiality obligations. At the same time, this would provide in-house counsel and management more insight into the innovation that is occurring, allowing for tracking of trade secrets, including negative trade secrets, i.e., ideas that did not work. Over time, this information flow creates a more robust IP environment. The inclusion of trade secret identification in patent programs is just by way of example. Trade secret management can and should play a role in almost every category of in-house counsel activity, from IT policies and procedures, to HR onboarding and exit procedures, to the identification of intellectual property that is purchased or sold during M&A activity.

Failing to take simple, proactive steps to develop a trade secret program can be costly. Trade secret conflicts, when they do occur, can be disruptive, competitively threatening, uncertain, and expensive. Potential witnesses may have more difficulty providing useful testimony when a company’s culture and practice does not include trade secret awareness. Employee witnesses may contradict each other as to what they view as competitively sensitive, or express themselves in a manner that conveys uncertainty. The company itself may struggle to define its trade secrets or to engage in a proper cost-benefit analysis before or during the dispute. An ounce of prevention—identifying the companies’ trade secrets on a regular basis, developing a strategy for protecting secrecy, and implementing basic procedures—can make litigation, when it does occur, more predictable and more “winnable.”

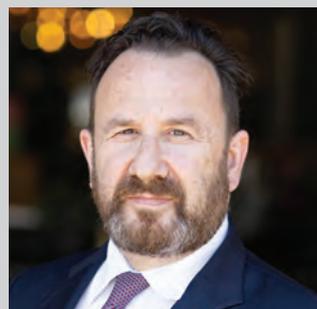
Michael Katz’s first trade secret litigation, as a young partner at Morrison & Foerster, LLP, provides a useful illustration. The client was a startup founded by senior engineers who until recently had worked at an industry-leading company in the fiber optical network space. The founders set up shop within

one mile of their former employer’s headquarters, eliciting the predictable lawsuit pitting Goliath, the established industry player, against David, the fledgling startup. The CEO, a gifted engineer, assured counsel he would devote up to 11 hours of his valuable time to wage this existential battle. Thus began Katz’s long (and tortured) education into the high and low art of trade secret litigation.

The Goliath, in this instance, deployed its substantial resources to bury David in early discovery. David objected to discovery on the grounds Goliath had failed to identify its trade secrets with reasonable particularity. Goliath served a trade secret designation with over 60 seemingly detailed descriptions of optical network components. Goliath, however, had no trade secret program; its in-house counsel did not know what constituted a trade secret as opposed to technical information one could find in published papers or datasheets. Frustrated by the inability to proceed with discovery for over nine months—discovery which would have forced the startup to identify its own trade secret development—Goliath resorted to self-help. It hired a former Mossad agent to dumpster dive on David’s private property. Goliath then produced the stolen documents, triumphantly, in response to David’s discovery requests. Game over, right?

Ultimately, the suit settled after the Court granted a motion for terminating sanctions for Goliath’s discovery abuse. David argued that Goliath’s self-help had hopelessly tainted any trade secret designation Goliath might make, since it had improperly and unlawfully obtained David’s trade secret information regarding the development of its competing product. The trial court agreed. Goliath’s mistake was not just tactical or ethical. Goliath initiated the conflict hurriedly, as is often required in trade secret cases, without having in place any meaningful trade secret program. Its failure to pre-identify its trade secrets in the normal course compromised Goliath’s ability to enforce claims against a startup competitor. Goliath was forced to “Fire,” without hardly any “Ready” or “Aim.” Consequently, a resource-rich Goliath was resoundingly defeated by a little David.

The ability to obtain early injunctive relief, or prevail in litigation over the longer haul, is greatly enhanced when a company engages in an ounce of prevention. It serves as a deterrent. It allows for efficient resolution of disputes. And it permits a decisive victory in cases where it matters most.



**Michael Katz**, a leading trade secret lawyer nationwide, is managing partner of Katz Ruby & Carle LLP.



**Victor Yu** recently joined Katz Ruby & Carle LLP as partner. He has significant experience in the company trade secret litigation practicing at Keeker Van Nest, LLP.

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## Generative AI Tools – Confidentiality and IP Considerations

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CBC’s General Counsel and EVP Corporate Development Raj Shukla has overseen the company’s legal issues for several years and stays current on technology updates in the banking sector.

One area of interest for many companies is the review and adoption of generative AI tools, and the issues that arise with use of these tools. This article highlights confidentiality and intellectual property issues to consider with evaluating the use of generative AI.

To start with the basics, generative AI uses artificial intelligence to create content based upon an existing set of data. Many of the widely known generative AI tools are trained on large collections of data, and these data collections are typically processed and filtered before they are used. There are many publicly available generative AI tools that generate content based upon the collection of data on which they were trained. One well-known publicly available example is ChatGPT, a generative AI tool developed by OpenAI that receives prompts or queries from a user and provides an output in a conversational-style format. Generative AI tools, including an upgraded version of ChatGPT, can also be accessed through paid license fees. These tools can further be structured to generate content based upon a limited dataset tailored to a specific company or use case.

### Confidentiality and Reliability Considerations with Generative AI Tools

As companies and their employees explore and use generative AI tools to create content, there are some considerations regarding confidentiality and reliability to keep in mind:

- If employees are using generative AI tools, does the company place any restrictions on how these tools are accessed?
- Are the tools publicly available, and if so, how current is the collection of data that is being used to generate content from those tools?
- If the tool is being accessed through a private license, what data sources are the generative AI tool drawing from in order to generate new content?
- If the generative AI tool is creating content based on a specific dataset of the company’s information, is there any sensitive or private company information included in that dataset?
- What kind of information is being input into the generative AI tool when a user is running queries?
- Is there a process in place for evaluating and verifying the accuracy of the generated content and the sources used?

### Protecting Innovation - Patents

From an IP perspective, it’s also important to understand the extent generative AI is used in any innovations that the company is seeking to protect. U.S. patent law requires that patent applicants identify the individuals who contributed to the conception and reduction to practice of the claimed inventions, and a patent can be challenged if the inventorship is incorrect. U.S. patent law also requires that the subject matter of an invention must be “eligible” for patent protection.

When evaluating inventions created with the assistance of AI, the US

Patent Office has issued guidance explaining that patent protection can be pursued for AI-assisted inventions when individuals make a significant contribution to the invention. Examples of the types of inventions that are eligible for patent protection include the use of an artificial neural network to detect anomalies, AI-based methods of analyzing speech signals, and an AI model that can assist with personalizing medical treatment to an individual patient.

### Protecting Brands - Trademarks

When seeking trademark protection, trademark applicants must provide evidence that their marks (e.g., brands and logos) are used in commerce, but the Trademark Office has cautioned against the use of AI-generated evidence for this purpose.

There has also been an increased use of generative AI tools to create marketing and advertising content, because of the speed and cost advantages that can be realized with the use of generative AI. If the source material for AI training includes others’ marks, this can increase risk that a company may be using others’ marks without authorization.

### Protecting Expressive Works – Copyrights

Copyright protection is another evolving area for generative AI. The Copyright Office continues to evaluate policy issues around the scope of copyrights in AI-generated works (such as how much human involvement is required or how to attribute authorship), and various courts are considering the appropriate use of copyrighted works in the training of AI models. Use of AI-generated images can create copyright risk and potential concerns over rights of publicity when authors of AI training source material assert their rights.

As companies adopt generative AI tools, keeping these considerations in mind will help to protect the company’s confidential information, minimize risk, and optimize the company’s ability to protect its innovations and brands.

**Raj Shukla** is General Counsel and EVP Corporate Development of Commercial Bank of California, responsible for all legal matters as well as corporate M&A. Previously, he held lending and credit focused roles at both publicly traded and privately held financial institutions, as well as an associate role at a law firm. He started his career in high-tech in the San Francisco Bay Area, and earned an MBA and an MRED in addition to his JD after relocating back to Southern California.



**Sheila Swaroop** is a partner in the Orange County office of Knobbe Martens, where she chairs the Litigation Group. She is a first-chair trial lawyer who has litigated numerous intellectual property cases over the course of her career and enjoys working with clients to protect and defend their innovations in the market. She can be reached at (949) 721-7646 or [Sheila.Swaroop@knobbe.com](mailto:Sheila.Swaroop@knobbe.com).





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# Understanding the California Consumers Legal Remedies Act: Key Insights and Implications

Written By: Lindsey Kress and Regina McClendon

The California Consumers Legal Remedies Act (CLRA) is a consumer protection statute that establishes strict guidelines against deceptive practices in consumer transactions and opens the door for legal challenges, including individual and class action lawsuits. Businesses operating in California or engaging in transactions with California consumers must be mindful of the CLRA, as it is frequently utilized by plaintiffs' attorneys, especially in class actions. Recent amendments have broadened its scope, contributing to an increase in lawsuits filed under the statute. This article explores the complexities of the CLRA.

## Overview of the CLRA

The CLRA prohibits deceptive practices in the sale or lease of goods and services. It enumerates more than 30 prohibited acts, including false advertising, misrepresentation of product source or quality, inclusion of unconscionable contract terms, and deceptive pricing strategies.

A significant amendment to the CLRA was enacted last summer with the introduction of California's Senate Bill 478, known as the Honest Pricing Law. Effective July 1, 2024, this amendment addresses the practice of so-called "drip pricing," commonly referred to as "junk fees." It mandates that companies advertise prices inclusive of all mandatory fees or charges at the outset. The initial advertised price must represent the total amount consumers are obligated to pay, excluding taxes or shipping fees.

The CLRA is favored by the plaintiffs' bar due to its extensive remedies and procedural advantages. The statute allows class action lawsuits without the need to demonstrate superiority, thereby streamlining the class certification process. The CLRA offers a broad range of remedies, including actual damages, statutory damages of \$1,000 per violation, punitive damages, and attorneys' fees.

## Litigation Trends and Strategic Implications

The Honest Pricing Law has significantly increased litigation under the CLRA. These lawsuits target "mandatory fees or charges" added at the end of transactions, which, according to the statute, are fees consumers must pay without receiving optional services or features, or that are not contingent on future consumer actions. Examples include service fees, resort fees, convenience fees, handling fees, and automatic gratuities. Companies across various industries, especially those making online sales, are being targeted. However, the Honest Pricing Law provides some exemptions. For instance, certain financial entities, food delivery platforms, vehicle rental companies, dealerships, and leases subject to other disclosure laws are excluded from the law's provisions subject to various requirements.

Beyond general claims of deceptive advertising and misrepresentation in the sale of goods and services, there has been an increase in plaintiffs using the CLRA to bolster claims under other statutes. This approach is sometimes used to circumvent statutory limitations. For example, there has been a rise in lawsuits asserting parallel claims under the CLRA related to website tracking and privacy violations, typically addressed under the California Invasion of Privacy Act and the California Consumer Privacy Act.

Furthermore, California's Automatic Renewal Law (ARL) underwent significant amendments through AB 2863, effective July 1, 2025. Key changes include the requirement for express affirmative consent to renewal terms, clear and prominent disclosure of all terms and cancellation methods prior to enrollment, a "click to cancel" option for online subscriptions, and additional notices before subscription renewal. However, since the ARL does not provide a private right of action, plaintiffs have been seeking relief for ARL violations under the CLRA. This increase in litigation underscores the importance for businesses to thoroughly understand the CLRA's provisions and the potential risks.

## Safe Harbor and Pre-Suit Demand Requirements

Despite the potential risks, the CLRA offers several defenses, including a safe harbor provision that enables companies to address individual and class claims before a lawsuit is filed. The statute mandates that a pre-suit demand letter be sent at least 30 days prior to filing a lawsuit for damages, informing the business of the violation and requesting corrective action. If the company provides relief within this 30-day safe harbor period, it can significantly mitigate its financial exposure, particularly as to classwide claims.

This process involves identifying similarly situated consumers, notifying them of their right to request a remedy, and ceasing the challenged practice. The safe

harbor provision offers substantial cost savings by limiting attorneys' fees and employing a claims-made settlement process, where refunds are provided only to those who request them.

## Considerations for Businesses

Businesses should implement protocols to ensure CLRA demand letters are promptly reviewed by legal departments. A quick evaluation of the risk and potential implementation of a pre-litigation cure can be beneficial. However, invoking the safe harbor is less protective than allowing a class action lawsuit to proceed, as it does not offer the same protections against future litigation.

Companies should also assess whether the challenged practice pertains to a good or service as defined by the CLRA, whether an exemption applies, and whether the transaction is sufficiently tethered to California. Courts generally find the CLRA does not apply to actions occurring outside California affecting non-residents.

## Conclusion

The CLRA presents both challenges and opportunities for businesses operating in California. While the statute offers broad remedies and facilitates class actions, it also provides mechanisms to limit exposure through proactive compliance and strategic use of the safe harbor. Businesses should review their practices to ensure compliance, especially in light of recent amendments targeting so-called "drip pricing" and the increase in plaintiffs using the CLRA to supplement claims brought under other statutes. By doing so, businesses can effectively mitigate risks and navigate the complexities of consumer class action litigation in California.

For those seeking more information on how the CLRA may impact their business, Troutman Pepper Locke's Consumer Finance attorneys are available to provide guidance. Additionally, for further insights into consumer finance and related topics, you can visit the Consumer Finance Podcast at [troutman.com](http://troutman.com). Industry leaders routinely appear on the podcast to discuss the latest consumer finance developments and strategies, including the May 22, 2025, episode titled "Feeling the Heat: Strategies to Keep Cool Under California's Consumers Legal Remedies Act," hosted by Chris Willis with guests Lindsey Kress and Regina McClendon.

### Lindsey E. Kress, Partner

Lindsey Kress focuses her practice on defending clients in class action and financial services litigation, as well as advising on privacy and cybersecurity issues. She regularly represents clients in complex matters in state and federal courts across the country. Kress has trial experience and has argued cases at both the trial and appellate levels. She also advises on emerging privacy and cybersecurity litigation and compliance issues related to data collection, use, sharing, and protection.



### Regina J. McClendon, Partner

Regina McClendon focuses her practice on class actions, business and commercial litigation, and financial institution litigation. She represents a diverse range of clients, including sales companies, mortgage banking companies and servicers, auto finance companies, insurance companies, transportation companies, banks, and other financial institutions. McClendon assists clients with litigation and regulatory matters involving claims of unfair or deceptive business practices, consumer protection statute violations, breach of contract, fraud, and violations of TILA, RESPA, FCRA, FDCPA, and TCPA.





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## California Employment Law Reminders

With many bills passed in California's 2025 legislative session waiting for the governor's signature, it is a good time for employers with operations in the state to review compliance with laws already on the books. It is also vital that employers keep up with developments. For instance, California's minimum wage will increase from \$16.50 per hour to \$16.90 per hour on Jan. 1, 2026. This increase applies to all employers, regardless of size. Employers must ensure their policies, employee handbooks, and training programs are compliant. We remind employers of eight laws that took effect Jan. 1, 2025, and already on the books.

### Anti-Discrimination Laws

1. Senate Bill (SB) 1137 clarified that the California Fair Employment and Housing Act, Unruh Civil Rights Act, and the provisions of the Education Code barring discrimination in public education prohibit discrimination not just on the basis of individual protected traits, but also on the basis of the intersectionality (combination) of two or more protected traits.

2. Assembly Bill (AB) 1815 amended the definition of "race" in the anti-discrimination provisions of the California Government and Education Codes. Under the amendments, race is "inclusive of traits associated with race, including but not limited to hair texture and protective hairstyles." Protective hairstyles "include but are not limited to such hairstyles as braids, locs, and twists."

### Jury, Court, Victim Time Off Provisions

3. AB 2499 amended the provisions for time off related to jury duty, court appearances, and victim-related activities. It:

- Expanded protections for employees;
- Required employers to provide clear notice of these rights; and
- Clarified that employees may use vacation or paid sick leave when on such leave.

Employers may require employees to provide documentation for their time off. The bill also reinforced anti-retaliation measures to protect employees exercising these rights.

### Paid Family Leave

4. AB 2123 eliminated an employer's ability to require employees to use accrued vacation leave before accessing California's Paid Family Leave Program (PFL). Employers may not require employees to use up to two weeks of accrued vacation before they can collect PFL benefits.

### Driver's License Requirements in Job Postings

5. SB 1100 introduced new restrictions on requiring a driver's license in job postings, unless it is a bona fide occupational qualification. Under the law, an employer may not include a statement that an applicant must have a driver's license, unless the employer reasonably expects driving to be one of the position's job functions and reasonably believes that using an alternative form of transportation would not be comparable in travel time or cost to the employer.

### Social Compliance Audits

6. AB 3234 required employers to make certain disclosures if they voluntarily audit their operations for the involvement of child labor. Such employers must post a link on their website to a report detailing the audit findings.

### Mandatory Meetings During Union Organizing

7. SB 399 enacted the California Worker Freedom from Employer Intimidation Act to curtail employers' ability to require employees to attend employer-sponsored meetings that convey the employer's opinions on religious or political matters.

### Freelance Worker Protection Act

8. Finally, SB 988 established the Freelance Worker Protection Act to impose minimum requirements on contracts between a hiring party and a freelance worker. Under the law, "freelance worker" is defined as:

1. A person or organization composed of no more than one person, whether or not incorporated or employing a trade name
2. That is hired or retained as a bona fide independent contractor by the hiring party to provide "professional services" (as defined under the California Labor Code)
3. In exchange for an amount equal to or greater than \$250

Employers should ensure compliance with all workplace laws. Jackson Lewis attorneys are available to provide more information on the complexities of California employment law. Subscribe to our California Workplace Law Blog, <https://www.californiaworkplacelawblog.com>, to keep updated on developments.

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**Christian J. Keeney** is a principal in the Orange County, California, office of Jackson Lewis P.C. Keeney focuses his dedication and commitment to defending employers in all types of employment law matters. His knowledge and experience extends to class actions, discrimination and harassment, and wrongful termination cases, as well as handling investigations and charges from government agencies.



While a formidable litigator, Keeney is equally committed to advising clients on proactive compliance solutions and litigation avoidance strategies. His recent engagements include conducting comprehensive audits of employment policies and procedures to assess and reduce legal risk, enhance internal employment practices, and improve employment-related documentation.

**Patricia Ann Matias** is a principal in the Orange County, California, office of Jackson Lewis P.C. and is a co-leader of Jackson Lewis' Hispanic resource group. Matias successfully defends employers in high-stakes, single-plaintiff litigation, including discrimination, harassment, retaliation, and wrongful termination matters, as well as in complex Private Attorneys General Act and class action matters. In addition to litigation,



Matias provides practical advice regarding personnel policies and decisions, performs workplace investigations, conducts audits, and provides management training. She regularly advises her clients on employment laws, such as those involving wage and hour compliance, leaves of absence, reasonable accommodations, and workplace investigations.



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## The Unexpected Complexities of Transferring LLC Ownership

Limited Liability Companies (LLCs) are a common business structure. Combining elements of corporations and partnerships, LLCs offer liability protection while maintaining operational flexibility.

However, there are times when a member of an LLC may wish, or need, to transfer their interest. Despite the seeming simplicity of such a transaction, numerous legal, financial, and operational hurdles can arise that would not necessarily occur when transferring stock in a corporation, which has a far more developed body of law and regulations. Because LLCs operate more like partnerships, the consent of other members often comes into play. This article explores these challenges and offers insights into navigating the process.

### Scenarios Prompting the Transfer of an LLC Interest

The decision to transfer an interest in an LLC can arise from many situations. A member may wish to exit due to personal circumstances such as a career shift, retirement, or disputes regarding strategy or management. Another example is the death of a member, where his or her interest passes to a spouse or children, and the LLC and/or its members want to acquire that interest. A further scenario occurs when a member seeks dissolution and state law allows the LLC or its members to acquire that member's interest to avoid it. Understanding the circumstances that prompt the sale is key to preparing for potential hurdles.

### Understanding LLC Interests

Before delving into the transfer process, it is important to clarify what is being transferred. In a member-managed LLC, each member participates in daily operations. In a manager-managed LLC, however, only designated managers hold this authority. This distinction matters because it affects who can approve transfers and influences the perceived value of the interest to potential buyers.

### Valuation Hurdles

A major challenge in transferring an LLC interest is valuation. Unlike publicly traded corporations, LLC interests do not have a readily available market price. Valuation may be based on book value, perceived market value, or an income-based approach such as discounted cash flow. Disagreements over valuation can prolong negotiations or halt the sale entirely. Fluctuating business performance and volatile market conditions add further uncertainty, making consensus difficult.

### Consent of Members

In most LLCs, the sale of an interest requires consent from other members. This can be a significant hurdle if members disagree on terms or on the suitability of a buyer. Interpersonal dynamics, personal biases, or strategic disagreements often come into play, delaying or derailing the process. In member-managed LLCs, each vote carries weight, creating a more complex negotiation.

### Operating Agreement Challenges

The operating agreement, the LLC's governing document, plays a pivotal role in transfers. Provisions may include restrictions on transferability, rights of first refusal, or tag-along and drag-along rights. These can complicate or even prevent a sale. This highlights the importance of drafting a thoughtful operating agreement from the outset with the help of legal professionals. A well-crafted agreement anticipates transfer scenarios and provides a framework for resolving them.

### Regulatory and Legal Hurdles

Each state has its own laws regulating LLCs. California, in particular, has a comprehensive set of requirements. Additionally, the sale of an LLC interest

may be treated as a securities transaction, triggering federal and state securities law compliance. Non-compliance can result in penalties, fines, or even rescission of the sale. Tax implications also loom large, affecting both the selling member and those who remain.

### Other Hurdles

Beyond these, broader factors can affect a transfer. Economic downturns can reduce the pool of potential buyers or lower valuations. Internal disputes may delay or derail the process. Third-party agreements tied to membership structure may also be affected by a sale, introducing additional complications.

### Navigating the Hurdles: Strategies and Best Practices

Despite these challenges, careful planning can smooth the process. Start with a comprehensive review of the operating agreement and relevant regulations. Employing objective, widely accepted valuation methods help mitigate disputes. Managing member dynamics, sometimes with a neutral mediator, can facilitate smoother negotiations. Consulting a knowledgeable business attorney is also critical to ensure legal compliance and avoid missteps.

Importantly, the value of a well-drafted operating agreement cannot be overstated. From the inception of the business, it can define valuation methods, consent requirements, and dispute resolution procedures. By addressing these issues early, many conflicts can be prevented or minimized when a transfer arises. Having such an agreement in place is not only good practice but a strategic decision with lasting implications for the LLC and its members.

**Jason Anderson** represents business owners and managers of closely held businesses in disputes over ownership, management and control, and the future direction of the businesses. Ironically, these disputes typically arise due to his clients' success as owners and managers. Anderson has successfully litigated these issues in courts in California and Delaware, and in private arbitration. Outside the courtroom, Anderson employs an aggressive, strategic, and practical approach to negotiating a separation of business owners' interests when resolving these sometimes highly contentious disputes, commonly referred to as a business divorce. Anderson views his best outcomes as those that save businesses money and reputational damage in order to ensure long-term growth and success.



**Jeremy Suiter** helps business partners and investors in closely held companies resolve contentious disputes that threaten future operations. For 20 years, he has guided corporations, LLCs, and partnerships through breach of contract, fraud, trade secret, and unfair competition matters—often achieving cost-effective results, even at trial. He also counsels companies on internal business litigation involving shareholder, partnership, and business valuation disputes.





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### Business Transactions Are Heating Up

Given the current market, now may be a favorable time for business owners to explore a sale. After a period of uncertainty, dealmaking is on the rise, driven by strong corporate valuations and a resurgence of M&A activity. With interest rates projected to decline, favorable financing conditions are expected to continue stimulating the market.

With 100+ investment bankers and a proven track record of closing 200+ transactions in recent years, Stout's investment banking team can help you navigate this sellers' market, maximizing value and securing a successful outcome. Whether you're considering a full sale, a recapitalization, or a strategic acquisition, we provide the strategic guidance and deal-making experience to help you achieve your goals.

### Secure Your Legacy With Strategic Estate Planning

For closely held businesses and their owners, now is the time for strategic planning. The federal estate and gift tax exemption amounts are permanently fixed at \$15 million per individual, and a level of certainty has returned to estate planning. Sophisticated planning tools are still available, including advanced trust planning as well as planning with discounts for lack of control and lack of marketability.

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**Carsten Hoffmann** is a valuation expert with over 20 years of experience in estate, gift, and income tax matters. He co-leads Stout's Trust and Estate Valuation practice and is Stout's Irvine Regional Leader. Prior to joining Stout, Hoffmann was a Managing Director at FMV Opinions, where he oversaw the operations of the Irvine, California, office. In addition, he is a top-ranked U.S. tennis champion, having represented the U.S. in international competition and achieved a No. 1 national doubles ranking.



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## Responding to the Rise of Artificial Intelligence: AI Governance

*Reema Shah, Partner at O'Melveny & Myers (New York)*  
*Sabrina van der Linden-Gonzales, Counsel at O'Melveny & Myers (Newport Beach)*

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools are increasingly ubiquitous. Not only are AI programs such as Google Gemini and Chat GPT available to the public for free, AI applications such as Microsoft's Copilot are being integrated into the electronic tools we use every day. Even if a company does not formally offer AI tools to employees for their work, employees may decide to consult AI-powered tools without notifying their employer. It is therefore of critical importance that companies—all companies—enact a robust AI governance policy. This policy should provide guidance to help employees use AI tools effectively, safely, and in a manner that advances the company's goals.

Artificial intelligence systems include any computer-based technology that is designed to perform tasks and make decisions that would typically require human intelligence. From powering chatbots, to summarizing voluminous sets of documents, to identifying trends in sales data: AI tools can be used for a wide variety of tasks. And these tools are getting more sophisticated day-by-day, offering companies the potential for significant productivity gains across a range of functions.

But AI tools come with risks, which can carry real-world legal consequences. AI tools may hallucinate or provide plausible-sounding but inaccurate answers. For instance, an Air Canada AI-powered customer service chatbot recently informed a customer about a fictional refund policy for bereavement fares. When the company refused to provide the refund, a court ruled that Air Canada was bound by what the chatbot told the customer. Moreover, the output of an AI tool is dependent on the data it was trained on. If that data contains biases, the AI tool can perpetuate or even amplify those issues. Another concern is data security and privacy: AI often requires large datasets, which may include personal information and can result in the inadvertent exposure of sensitive data or the use of data without proper consent. Finally, there are transparency and explainability risks. AI models can operate like a black box, making it difficult to assess trustworthiness or assign accountability to outputs. Company policies on the use of AI tools should note these issues and make sure that AI tools are used to support their employees rather than replace their judgment.

### New Regulations for AI Use in Employment

Special consideration should be given to the use of AI in the employment context. AI tools offer the potential to make the recruitment and hiring process more efficient and effective, including, for example, by expediting review of a large volume of resumes to consider whether the education, experience, and skills listed match the job description. But there are especially pronounced risks with using AI in this context. Should AI tools lead to discriminatory outcomes, liability is possible under longstanding state and federal anti-discrimination laws. Additionally, many states are focused on AI-specific risks in consequential contexts such as the workplace and have issued new regulations and enacted legislation to address these. Companies must be aware of these new regulatory requirements.

For example, the California Civil Rights Council recently issued regulations clarifying how existing requirements under the Fair Employment and Housing Act apply to the use of AI and automated decision systems. The regulations entered into effect on October 1, 2025. The regulations apply broadly to any computational process that assists with employment activities, including hiring, promotions, and terminations, and prohibit employers from using AI or other decision systems that discriminate against applicants or employees based on protected categories under the Act. The regulations also encourage employers using these tools to undertake bias audits, and impose various record-keeping requirements. Companies using AI or other automated decision tools in California in the employment context

should consider undertaking bias audits, and documenting the results and their response, as the absence of such evidence could weigh against them in future discrimination cases under the new guidance. Companies should further update their records retention policies to ensure that any data used or generated by automated decision systems is preserved in accordance with the new requirements.

### Intellectual Property Concerns Relating to the Use of Generative AI

Careful consideration is also required when using generative AI tools, which can be used to create text, images, audio or video. While this can again create tremendous opportunities for businesses, companies should also be aware of potential pitfalls. AI models are trained on large volumes of data, which can include content that is subject to IP protections such as copyright. Reliance on AI tools without appropriate guardrails can therefore trigger potential infringement issues. For instance, an employee in the marketing department may utilize generative AI to create an advertisement that saves time and cuts costs. But if the AI tool creates an advertising image that contains copyrighted material or a celebrity lookalike, the company could be exposed to liability. Companies should have clear policies in place to guide their employees on the appropriate use of generative AI tools.

### How to Approach Creating a Company AI Policy?

When developing an AI governance policy, companies should first consider how their employees are using AI tools and how they are interested in using them in the future. They can then tailor their policies to address risks specific to current and contemplated use cases. It is also important to assess whether third parties such as company vendors are using AI in their processes, and if so, include clauses governing AI use in vendor contracts. Such language could include, at a minimum, a guarantee by the vendor that they comply with all applicable laws and regulations when using AI tools, and it could also include an indemnity provision or requirement for insurance that covers any liabilities arising from the use of AI tools. Companies considering the opportunities and risks posed by AI on their operations, or developing AI policies, should consult experienced counsel to help navigate this quickly-evolving regulatory and litigation landscape.

**Reema Shah** is a partner in O'Melveny's New York office and a leading authority on AI regulation and litigation. She counsels and represents clients on all types of AI and advanced technology matters, including IP, compliance, risk management, and privacy and data security. She draws on her extensive experience as a senior U.S. government official, including at the White House and as Deputy General Counsel of the Department of Commerce, where she led a number of high-profile litigation, regulatory and enforcement matters, with a focus on AI and advanced technologies.



**Sabrina van der Linden-Gonzales** is a litigation counsel in O'Melveny's Newport Beach office. Her practice focuses on products liability and class actions. She also regularly advises on privacy- and cybersecurity litigation.



# The New Majority: Where Policy Meets Principled Leadership

In a time of political polarization and economic uncertainty, The New Majority stands as a pragmatic voice for reason, results, and responsible leadership.

Founded in California by a coalition of business leaders, entrepreneurs, and civic-minded individuals, The New Majority (NMOC) is a non-profit political and advocacy organization committed to promoting fiscally responsible, pro-business policies and supporting candidates who prioritize problem-solving, free enterprise and expanding opportunities for all Californians.

We believe in building a better future through constructive engagement. Membership provides more than a seat at the table, it offers access to exclusive events with elected officials, policy experts and political strategists. With chapters across the state and deep roots in Orange County, The New Majority has earned a reputation as one of California's most effective and respected political organizations for more than 25 years.

Our members are decision-makers, thought leaders, and community builders who understand that good governance drives prosperity. NMOC is more than a forum for discussion – it is a vehicle for action. Members support candidates who champion fiscal discipline, education reform, and pragmatic solutions to the state's toughest challenges.

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# California CCP § 231.7: New Limits in 2026 on Peremptory Challenges in Civil Jury Selection

By Vince M. Verde, Esq. and MiRi Song, Esq.

## Quick Hits

- Effective January 1, 2026, California Code of Civil Procedure section 231.7 will apply to civil jury trials, including employment cases, and significantly restrict the use of peremptory strikes.
- Section 231.7 replaces the intent-based Batson/Wheeler framework with an effects-based standard.
- Twelve categorical and three demeanor-based reasons for peremptory strikes are presumptively invalid unless rebutted by clear and convincing evidence tied to juror impartiality.

### I. Expanded Scope and Effective Date

California Code of Civil Procedure section 231.7 marks a shift in jury selection. Enacted to address concerns that the Batson/Wheeler framework failed to prevent exclusion of jurors based on both explicit and implicit discrimination, section 231.7 will soon extend beyond criminal jury trials to civil jury trials starting on January 1, 2026.

### II. A Paradigm Shift: From Batson/Wheeler to Section 231.7

The Batson/Wheeler framework for peremptory strikes entails: a prima facie case of purposeful discrimination; a neutral explanation; and then a decision by the court whether intentional bias was proven. This method has been questioned as an effective way to root out undue influences in jury selection.

In comes Section 231.7. The new statute replaces this intent-based analysis with an effects-based standard. Now, an objection is sustained whenever there is a “substantial likelihood” that an objectively reasonable person would view protected-group membership as a factor in the peremptory strike. The statute explicitly addresses both implicit and institutional bias, and objections may be raised by any party or by the court sua sponte. There is no longer a prima facie stage. Once an objection is made, the proponent must immediately state the reason for the strike, which the court evaluates considering the totality of the circumstances.

### III. Key Provisions and Legal Standards

Section 231.7 introduces several critical legal standards that litigators must understand.

#### 1. Protected Classes

Section 231.7 prohibits peremptory challenges based on race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, national origin, or religious affiliation, as well as perceived membership in any of these groups.

#### 2. Causation Standard

The “substantial likelihood” standard is lower than “more likely than not” and does not require proof of intent. The focus is on whether an objectively reasonable person (aware of implicit and institutional bias) would view protected status as a factor in the strike.

#### 3. Procedural Changes

There is no prima facie requirement. Once an objection is raised, the proponent must immediately state the reason for the strike, and the court evaluates only the reasons given.

#### 4. Presumptively Invalid Reasons for Peremptory Challenges

Section 231.7 identifies twelve categorical and three demeanor-based reasons that are presumptively invalid. Unless rebutted by clear and convincing evidence that the reason is unrelated to protected status and instead bears directly on the juror’s impartiality, these reasons cannot justify a peremptory strike. Among the most salient are:

- Neighborhood or ZIP code;
- Receipt of state benefits;
- Unemployment, underemployment, or employment in a field serving protected populations;
- Dress, attire, or personal appearance;
- English as a second language or multilingual ability;
- Any justification equally applicable to an unchallenged juror; and
- Demeanor-based reasons (e.g., inattentiveness, lack of eye contact, hostility, “bad attitude,” or “confused answers”)—unless the court personally observed the conduct and counsel explains its relevance to impartiality.

### IV. Remedies and Appellate Review

Section 231.7 provides robust remedies. If an objection under section 231.7 is sustained, the court must provide one or more of the following remedies:

- Quash the venire and begin jury selection anew (upon request);
- Declare a mistrial if the jury has been sworn and the defendant so requests;
- Seat the challenged juror;
- Grant additional peremptory challenges; or
- Provide other appropriate relief.

Denial of an objection is reviewed de novo on appeal, and an erroneous denial is considered prejudicial per se.

### V. Practical Implications for Employment Litigators

Section 231.7’s changes will have far-reaching effects on trial strategy and case management for employment litigators. The following considerations will take on more importance:

#### 1. Contraction of Usable Peremptories

Longstanding strategies in employment trials—such as striking jurors perceived as union-aligned, unemployed, skeptical of corporate practices, or reliant on public benefits—may now trigger objections and result in the loss of the strike. Counsel must therefore reassess traditional heuristics for jury selection.

#### 2. Voir Dire Consistency and Foundation

Consistency and thoroughness in voir dire are now more critical than ever. Counsel must ask all panels comparable questions on topics that may form the basis for later strikes. Cursory or divergent questioning can be cited as evidence of discriminatory motivation. Thus, it is essential to document why each area of inquiry relates to case-specific fairness (e.g., FLSA knowledge, experience with HR investigations).

#### 3. Heightened Risk for Demeanor-Based Strikes

If counsel intends to rely on inattentiveness, hostility, or body language, the court must have independently observed the conduct and counsel must articulate why it matters to case fairness. Absent that record, the strike is presumptively invalid. This places a premium on real-time documentation and judicial observation.

#### 4. Record-Making Is Critical

Detailed record-making will be essential to preserve issues for appeal and justify peremptory strikes. The court may not speculate about unstated reasons. Preserve the record with specific offers of proof (e.g., “Juror 23 repeatedly rolled her eyes during HR-policy questions”).

#### 5. Increased Likelihood of Delays and Mistrials

Frequent objections—including those raised sua sponte by the court—could extend jury selection and add cost. Counsel should budget trial time accordingly and prepare clients for increased potential for delays and mistrial risk.

#### 6. Settlement Dynamics

Plaintiffs aware of the employer’s limited peremptory toolbox may perceive a tactical advantage. Parties should reassess settlement valuations in the stricter landscape.

### VI. Recommended Action Items

To navigate the new landscape created by section 231.7, trial teams should consider the following proactive steps:

- Update voir dire outlines to avoid questions likely to elicit answers tied to presumptively invalid reasons and ensure consistent panel-wide questioning.
- Train trial teams on implicit-bias concepts, proper record-making, and contemporaneous justification techniques.
- Prepare bench memoranda and proposed orders addressing section 231.7 objections outside the venire’s presence.
- Re-examine mock jury protocols to evaluate whether previously favored demographic screens for mock panels remain permissible predictors of actual voir dire strikes.
- Educate HR and in-house counsel regarding the possibility of jurors with backgrounds management may instinctively view as unfavorable and explain the new limits.
- Factor the stricter jury-selection landscape into risk assessments and settlement valuations, particularly in high-stakes discrimination and retaliation cases.

By taking such proactive steps, trial teams on employment matters can adapt to the new legal landscape under section 231.7 and continue to advocate effectively.

**Vince Verde** – Shareholder, Orange County  
Vince is the head of the firm’s Trial Practice Group and founder of Ogletree’s Orange County Office. He is a litigator and former prosecutor with experience representing clients in litigation, including employment, labor matters, commercial disputes, insurance matters, and health and disability. He has handled claims involving unfair competition, trade secret and non-compete matters, workplace violence, intellectual property rights, class action lawsuits, and insurance claims. He has extensive experience in all areas of employment law.



**MiRi Song** – Of Counsel, Los Angeles  
MiRi is a seasoned trial lawyer who brings to her employment law practice more than a decade of experience. She previously served as an Assistant United States Attorney in the Central District of California, where she served as a chief of a senior section. MiRi tried and won numerous federal cases, as well as handled high-stakes criminal matters. She also has extensive experience representing companies in complex commercial and employment disputes.





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# From Zoom to Conference Room: California's New Era of Office Mandates

By Ashley Halberda and Alessandra Whipple

California employers are once again navigating uncharted territory in the ever-shifting world of workplace norms. Earlier this year, Governor Gavin Newsom announced a policy requiring state employees to work in the office four days per week. This move, signaling a pushback against the remote-work era, is reverberating throughout the private sector. Many employers are following suit, gradually pulling employees back from the comfort of home offices into in-person collaboration spaces.

This transition is not just about logistics—it's about striking a balance between effective return-to-office policies, enforcement of those policies, and incentivizing employees to return. The distinction between an office that is simply a space to work and an office that fosters a collaborative and inviting environment is critical.

## Employers Have the Right to Require Employees to Work In-Office

One of the most common misconceptions plaguing the office environment, especially amongst employees entering the workforce for the first time, is that remote work is an entitlement. However, California law makes clear that remote work is the exception, not the rule. Employers retain the right to control the conditions of employment and set reasonable workplace requirements, including mandating on-site attendance.



Ashley Halberda

Much like everything else, when it comes to enforcing these policies, consistency is key. Any return-to-office policy should be applied uniformly across the workforce. Favoring certain groups without a legally valid reason can open the door to discrimination claims. Equally as important is providing sufficient notice of the company's intent to require employees to return to the office so that employees can adequately prepare for the change in workplace expectations.

By grounding policies in legitimate business needs—such as collaboration, performance, and client service—employers can confidently exercise their right to require an in-office presence.

## Establish Clear and Objective In-Office Expectations

Clarity is the foundation of compliance. Employers who expect employees to spend a certain number of days in the office should make this expectation clear through written communication to employees as often as practicable.

• **Offer letters and contracts:** For new hires, in-office requirements should be clearly stated at the outset. A well-drafted offer letter or employment agreement can set expectations and prevent misunderstandings later.

• **Written policies:** For current staff, any return-to-office policy should be formalized in a company-wide communication signaling a change, and further reiterate the in-office requirements in the employee handbook or a standalone policy document. Specify in writing how many days per week are required, how exceptions are handled, and what the consequences are for non-compliance. Written policies not only provide consistency, but they also give managers a tool for enforcement if employees fail to comply.

Ambiguity is the enemy here. Employers that leave policies vague—e.g., “occasional in-office presence required”—invite disputes and erode employee trust, resulting in potential discrimination and retaliation lawsuits.

## Enticing Employees to Return

Mandates alone are insufficient to draw employees back to the office or foster a thriving and engaged office culture. To facilitate employees transitioning back to the office, California employers are offering a panoply of perks to make the workplace more appealing:

• **Food and beverage upgrades:** Free snacks, quality coffee, or in-office

monthly lunch-and-learns, can recast a dreaded commute to something to which employees look forward.

• **Wellness benefits:** Providing or coordinating with property management companies certain onsite amenities, such as farmers' markets, cafes, or fitness centers shows employees that their well-being is valued.

• **On-site childcare:** For working parents, this can be a game-changer, easing the burden of balancing family and work. Importantly, remote work is not a substitution for childcare, and employers are not required to accommodate employees with remote work arrangements absent requisite paperwork.

• **Revamped common areas:** Comfortable lounges, collaborative spaces, and outdoor work areas create a more dynamic environment.

• **Pet-friendly policies:** Allowing pets in the office can improve morale and reduce employee stress—an office mascot is a “pawfect” way to inspire employees to venture back to the office with their furry friends in tow.

The goal is not to bribe employees into returning, but to foster a workplace culture that entices employees back into the office. Employers that couple mandates with meaningful office benefits and enriching office culture are more likely to see higher compliance and employee satisfaction.

## Remote Work as a Reasonable Accommodation

While remote work is generally discretionary, California employers must remain mindful of legal obligations under the Fair Employment and Housing Act (FEHA), the California Family Rights Act (CFRA), and other applicable federal laws, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

If an employee has a medical condition that impairs his or her ability to work in-person, telework may be a reasonable accommodation. Employers are permitted to require appropriate medical documentation, such as a doctor's note, to substantiate the need and weed out any “sham” requests. The good faith interactive process remains the cornerstone of addressing remote work accommodation requests.

## Employee Classification Considerations

The return to the office also has implications for employee classification and wage-hour compliance.

• **Outside Sales Exemption:** In California, this exemption applies to employees who regularly spend more than half of their working time away from the office/home office making sales. Employers who bring these employees back into the office risk undermining the exemption if not carefully managed.

• **Breaks and Hours Worked:** In-office environments make it easier for employers to monitor compliance with legally required meal and rest breaks and recording hours worked, reducing both administrative headaches and potential liability.

By reestablishing workplace structure, employers can mitigate classification disputes and wage and hour risks that proliferated in the remote era.

## Conclusion

The pendulum has swung back in favor of in-office work, and California employers are in the thick of managing this transition. The return-to-office movement is not just about physical presence—it is about reestablishing an office culture, fostering collaboration, and ensuring long-term business success. Employers who approach the process with clarity, fairness, and creativity are best positioned to thrive in this California workplace evolution.



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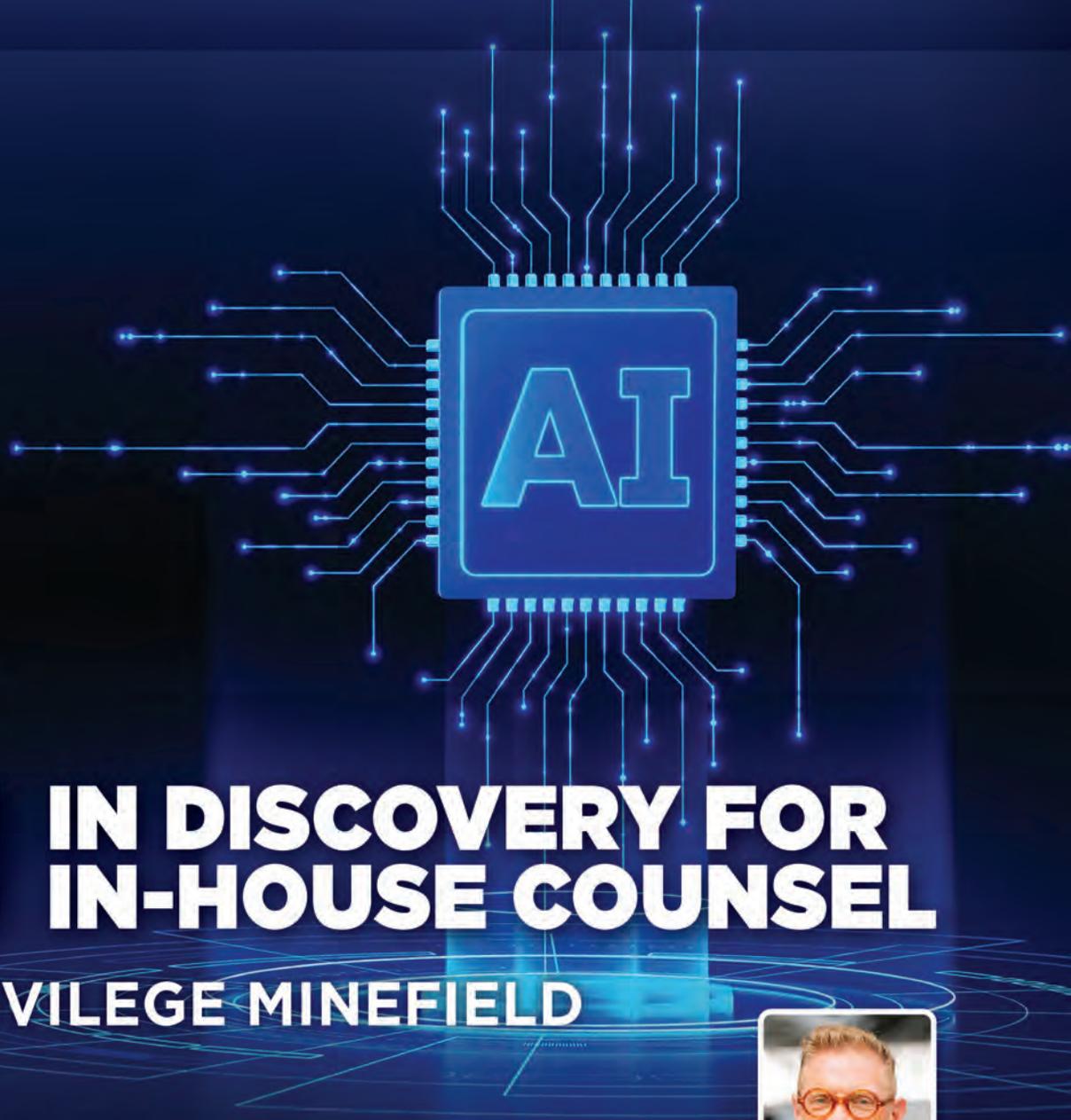
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# GEN AI IN DISCOVERY FOR IN-HOUSE COUNSEL

## NAVIGATING THE PRIVILEGE MINEFIELD

By Paul Nelson, Esq



The rise of generative AI tools—chatbots, text synthesizers, prompt-based assistants—is transforming how organizations draft, analyze, and respond to legal documents. While the efficiencies are alluring, General Counsel (GCs) must now grapple with a less obvious but critical risk: the potential erosion of attorney-client privilege and work product protections when AI is used in legal workflows.

### The Privilege Paradox of GenAI

GenAI systems don't hold legal training or privilege status. So when prompts or outputs are stored in corporate systems (especially third-party SaaS or cloud platforms), courts may regard those interactions as discoverable evidence. In litigation, the opposing party could demand prompt logs, AI drafts, or prompt histories, treating them as relevant ESI. This jeopardizes confidential legal strategy.<sup>Fn1</sup>

The danger intensifies when non-lawyer staff (e.g. business users) use AI to generate documents, then hand them to legal for "polishing." Absent strict policy controls, that process can convert raw AI output into document form that lacks privilege protection. The prompt and related system history might be held discoverable.

### What GCs Should Be Doing Now

#### 1. Establish a clear AI usage policy

Define what AI may and may not be used for (e.g. internal memos, first drafts vs legal advice). Require that any AI-assisted work is overseen or reviewed by legal counsel and stored on enterprise-controlled systems.

#### 2. Segregate legal vs non-legal prompts

Architect AI usage so that legal team prompts and inputs never mix in the same environment as business users. Keep a clean boundary: only attorneys

or supervised legal staff use privileged AI workspaces.

#### 3. Retain control over storage and access

Avoid using consumer or external AI platforms without contractual guarantees of confidentiality, deletion of prompt logs, and restricted access. Prefer self-hosted or enterprise AI models when possible.

#### 4. Train users on privilege risks

Educate legal and business users on what constitutes privileged communication. Prompt drafting should be treated like an internal memo: keep metadata, context, and chain of custody under counsel control.

#### 5. Document workflows and audit trails

When AI is used, log who asked what, when, and why. Maintain version control so that human edits and counsel inputs are clearly demarcated from raw AI output.

### From Risk to Opportunity: GCs as AI Stewards

Far from being a defensive play, properly governed AI deployment can become a strategic asset for legal departments. Counsel can lead cross-functional efforts—engineering, privacy, compliance—to set guardrails that allow innovation while preserving privilege. A department that proves it can responsibly integrate AI tools gains stronger internal credibility, cost leverage, and boardroom influence. (TechRadar)

In short: AI adoption is inevitable, but improperly handled it can unravel your most cherished legal protections. For in-house counsel, 2025 may well be defined not by whether you adopt AI, but by whether you survive it.

*Fn1: Generative AI and the challenge of preserving privilege in discovery*  
By Tara Lawler, Elizabeth Marie Gary and Bansri Mehta McCarthy  
September 18, 2025 7:13 AM PDT Updated September 18, 2025

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**PAUL NELSON, ESQ.**

**Paul Nelson** is the founder of **Nelson Kirkman Family Law Attorneys**, a premier California firm specializing in high-net-worth divorces. **Certified by the State Bar of California Board of Legal Specialization in Family Law**, Paul brings extensive courtroom experience and a deep command of California family law to every case. His strategic approach and relentless advocacy have earned him a reputation for securing exceptional results for business owners, entrepreneurs, and high-earning professionals navigating complex divorce proceedings.

Recognized among the legal elite, Paul holds the prestigious **AV Preeminent rating from Martindale-Hubbell**, boasts **twenty five-star ratings on Avvo**, and has been consistently

honored by **Super Lawyers**.

A thought leader in the legal community, Paul's insights have been featured in **Forbes**, **Fortune**, and the **Orange County Business Journal**. He is also the author of the **Amazon best-selling book, *The Dissolution Solution***, which provides a strategic roadmap for high-asset divorces.

Paul is an active member of the **Orange County Bar Association**, the **State Bar of California**, and the **J. Reuben Clark Law Society**.

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# Twin California Rulings Mark a Turning Point for AI-Copyright Fair Use

By: Moish E. Peltz, Esq. and Steven T. Cooper, Esq.



In the space of forty-eight hours, two judges of the Northern District of California issued detailed, partially contrasting opinions on whether large language model (“LLM”) training that copies entire books without permission, and whether digitizing and retaining a digital library of such books, is protected by fair use.

On June 23, 2025, Judge Alsup in *Bartz v. Anthropic* found that Anthropic’s ingestion of seven million books was “spectacularly transformative” and therefore qualified as fair use, although the company must still face a separate damages trial for its wholesale downloads from pirate sites.

Two days later, in *Kadrey v. Meta* (June 25, 2025), Judge Chhabria likewise granted Meta summary judgment on fair use for training Llama with the works of thirteen authors. However, he sharply criticized the plaintiffs for failing to produce evidence of market harm, rejected the notion of a “transformative use shortcut,” and emphasized that the fourth fair use factor—the effect on the market—is “the single most important element.”

Taken together, the opinions supply the first judicial roadmap for evaluating AI training under 17 U.S.C. § 107, confirm that fair use analysis survives intact in the generative AI era, and signal that future plaintiffs must marshal credible, data-driven evidence of market substitution in order to survive summary judgment.

## What Anthropic Won—and Still Risks

Judge Alsup’s opinion is unabashedly enthusiastic about machine learning: internalizing expressive works to extract statistical patterns is no different, he writes, from the way “schoolchildren learn to write well,” and therefore “does not implicate the competitive or creative displacement that concerns the Copyright Act.”

On that basis fair use factors one and three (the purpose and character of the use, and the amount and substantiality of the portion used in relation to the copyrighted work) weighed heavily for the defendant, and factor four (the effect of the use on the potential market or value of the copyrighted work) favored Anthropic because no infringing outputs were alleged and the court did not find that potential competition from new AI-generated works was protected under the Copyright Act. Crucially, however, Judge Alsup severed the question of how Anthropic obtained its corpus. Downloading from shadow libraries may yet expose the company to statutory damages, and the opinion invites a jury to decide whether the piracy was willful. The clear message: lawful acquisition is not strictly required for fair use, but it remains a costly litigation vulnerability.

## How Meta Prevailed—and Narrowed the Precedent

Judge Chhabria agreed that LLM training is “highly transformative,” but refused to let that finding “blow off” the economic analysis. He held that the authors’ two theories of market harm—verbatim regurgitation and lost licensing fees—were “clear losers” because the record showed Llama could not reproduce more than fifty consecutive words and because the Copyright Act does not guarantee a market to license works for the very purpose of transformation. On that deficient record, factor four tipped to Meta, and the court granted summary judgment.

The opinion, however, is narrower than Anthropic’s. It applies only to the thirteen named authors; it preserves a live claim that Meta illegally distributed works while torrenting its corpus; and, expressly countering the view of Judge Alsup, it stresses that better evidence of indirect market dilution—e.g., AI-generated romance novels crowding out human ones—could swing the analysis the other way.

## Convergences and Fault Lines

Transformative purpose remains essential but not conclusive. Both judges embraced the human learning analogy, yet Judge Chhabria cautioned that transformativeness alone cannot “inoculate” AI developers. Future defendants are likely to pair this argument with empirical studies on regurgitation rates and market impact. Pirate sourcing serves as a reputational burden rather than an automatic defeat. Judge Alsup viewed mass piracy as a potential bad faith factor, while Judge Chhabria considered it relevant but immaterial without proof of market harm. In either case, maintaining robust provenance records remains the most cost-effective safeguard. Factor four is poised to drive the next wave of litigation. *Kadrey* calls for economic modeling of substitution effects, suggesting plaintiffs will focus on demonstrating how models duplicate materials and diminish markets—such as the news sector in the *New York Times* case—while defendants will stress ongoing demand for marquee authors and the abundance of public domain training data. For now, the spotlight is on model inputs rather than outputs. Neither set of plaintiffs alleged that the LLMs publicly generated infringing works, and the scope of liability for AI-generated outputs remains unsettled.

## Action Points for AI Businesses and Enterprises Using Them

**Document the data chain—down to the URL.** Maintain click-through or purchase records for every ingest source and

track each filtration step. While a clean corpus will not automatically defeat infringement claims, it can significantly reduce a plaintiff’s leverage.

**Actively measure and limit memorization.** Adversarial prompt audits and n-gram filtering can help demonstrate that the model cannot emit protected passages longer than minimal, non-actionable snippets.

**Model market impact before plaintiffs do.** Engaging independent economists to assess whether your product might cannibalize—or even expand—sales of comparable human works provides a proactive defense against factor four claims.

**Keep reproduction separate from distribution.** If torrenting, peer-to-peer retrieval, or third-party hosting is unavoidable, isolate those processes in sandboxed workflows and monitor them closely. Anthropic and Meta still face claims arising from improperly seeded training data that survived summary judgment.

**Prepare for a patchwork legal environment until higher courts intervene.** At present, these rulings hold sway only in the Northern District of California. Divergent approaches in the SDNY (*New York Times*), the MDL before Judge Stein, and pending visual-arts cases could create a circuit split within the year.

## Bottom Line

Both courts agree that teaching machines to write is, at its core, the type of knowledge-building progress copyright law is meant to foster. They diverge on how much economic evidence is needed to ensure that progress does not undermine human creativity. For companies that can prove lawful acquisition, minimize memorization, and substantiate real-world benefits, these “twin pillars” of California fair use jurisprudence offer a solid (but not unshakeable) foundation on which to keep training towards superintelligence.



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From the beginning, we have distinguished ourselves by emphasizing an integrated approach to client service. Business owners benefit from counsel that extends beyond transactional matters to encompass tax efficiency, succession planning, and long-term strategy. Families rely on us for sophisticated estate planning solutions designed to preserve wealth across generations. Nonprofits and charitable foundations turn to us for governance, compliance, and structuring advice that ensures mission-driven impact.

While our practice areas have broadened, our core principles have remained constant. We are committed to technical excellence, integrity, and client-centered service. This focus has fostered long-standing relationships, with many clients entrusting us with their business and personal matters for decades.

Equally significant is our firm culture. We have cultivated an environment that encourages collaboration, professional development, and innovation. Our attorneys and staff are united by a shared purpose: helping clients navigate complex legal challenges with clarity and foresight.

As we look to the future, we remain focused on anticipating the evolving needs of our clients. Whether advising on changes to tax law, guiding businesses through succession and growth, or helping nonprofits maximize their impact in a dynamic regulatory landscape, we are committed to providing counsel that is both practical and forward-thinking.

Celebrating our 50th anniversary provides an opportunity to reflect not only on how far we have come, but also to reaffirm the principles that have guided us from the start. We are deeply grateful to our clients, colleagues, and community partners who have made this journey possible. Together, we have built a legacy of service that will endure.

As we begin our next chapter, we do so with confidence, dedication, and a clear vision: to remain the trusted advisor our clients rely on when the decisions ahead matter most.

**Matt Brown** is a partner at Brown & Streza. He leads the firm's Tax, Trusts & Estates Group and Ultra-High-Net-Worth practice. He advises business owners and philanthropists on the tax and nontax aspects of estate planning, charitable planning, and business succession planning. A Certified Specialist in Estate Planning, Trust & Probate Law by the California State Bar Board of Legal Specialization and an ACTEC Fellow, he is consistently recognized among Orange County's leading attorneys.



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# Get Ready Now: New Tax Disclosure Rules That Will Shape 2025 Reporting

Investors have long demanded greater transparency into companies' tax positions, especially for multinationals with volatile effective tax rates. The FASB's new standard, ASU 2023-09, Income Taxes (Topic 740): Improvements to Income Tax Disclosures, delivers just that.

This new standard significantly raises the bar on how companies present tax information. It is designed to provide investors with clearer, more comparable insights while challenging companies to strengthen data readiness, controls, and communication.

For public business entities (PBEs), these expanded disclosures are effective for annual periods beginning after December 15, 2024, meaning your 2025 Form 10-K will be under the spotlight. Other entities follow one year later, with early adoption permitted.

Public companies can't afford to wait. Early preparation will reduce compliance risks and ensure you are ready to present accurate, transparent disclosures when investors and regulators examine 2025 filings.

## What's Changing?

1. **Standardized Rate Reconciliation.** PBEs must present an annual tabular rate reconciliation in both percentages and reporting currency amounts using eight specified categories:

- (a) state and local income tax (net of federal effect),
- (b) foreign tax effects,
- (c) effect of changes in tax laws or rates enacted in the current period,
- (d) effect of cross-border tax laws,
- (e) tax credits,
- (f) changes in valuation allowances,
- (g) nontaxable or nondeductible items, and
- (h) changes in unrecognized tax benefits.

Reconciling items that meet a quantitative threshold of 5% (pretax income  $\times$  the applicable statutory rate of 21%) require further disaggregation by nature. For foreign tax effects, companies must also disaggregate by jurisdiction when the threshold is met.

2. **Cross-Border Specifics For U.S. Registrants.** Multinational companies must now explicitly disclose the "effect of cross-border tax laws." This includes incremental U.S. tax on foreign income from GILTI, BEAT, and FDII, recurring drivers of rate variability. Investors will expect a sharper narrative around how global structures interact with U.S. rules and whether your long-term tax strategy can deliver sustainable results.

3. **Granular Cash Tax Disclosure.** All entities must disclose income taxes paid by federal state and foreign jurisdiction. Any individual jurisdiction that represents 5% or more of total taxes paid must be highlighted. This will require tighter data pipelines from cash-tax sources outside the provision system.

4. **Other Additions and Eliminations.** All entities must disaggregate pretax income between domestic and foreign and income tax expense by federal, state, and foreign, aligning GAAP with SEC Regulation S-X 4-08(h).

The ASU eliminates the requirement to disclose:

- The 12-month range of reasonably possible changes in unrecognized tax benefits.
- Certain cumulative temporary differences when deferred taxes are not recognized due to exceptions.

## Why It Matters

For calendar-year PBEs, 2025 reporting will be the first time investors and the SEC see your disclosures under this new standard.

That, in turn, elevates expectations for:

- **Data readiness.** You will need to tag reconciling items to the correct category, test for the 5% disaggregation threshold, and (for foreign items) capture jurisdiction-level details with audit-ready support.
- **Controls and documentation.** Expect auditors to probe how you determine "by nature" disaggregation, assess materiality, and explain judgment calls in categorization. The ASU also makes clear that full rate-rec detail is required annually, not on an interim basis.
- **Investor communication.** With standardized categories, analysts will model peer ETRs more easily. A clear narrative will reduce misinterpretation and build trust.

## A Practical Action Plan for 2025

- **Map your data model to the eight categories.** Update provision systems and close checklists so reconciling items are consistently classified, with 5% testing built in. Flag foreign items for potential jurisdictional breakout.
- **Stand up "taxes-paid" reporting.** Coordinate with AP and Treasury now to produce an annual schedule split by federal, state, and foreign payments, and surface any jurisdictions that cross the 5% threshold. Reconcile to cash outflows and refunds.
- **Tighten controls and narratives.** Document the nature of significant reconciling items, apply the 5% rule for mandatory disaggregation (including jurisdictional detail for foreign items), and consider additional disclosure when a single state/local or jurisdiction represents a significant concentration (where  $>5\%$  e.g., more than 50% of the category), and cross-border mechanics (e.g., GILTI/FDII/BEAT). Draft plain-English explanations suitable for MD&A dialogue.
- **Plan transition.** Decide now whether to adopt prospectively or retrospectively. Align with your audit committee so stakeholders understand which periods will display the new disaggregation.

## Why You Should Act Now

The 2025 reporting cycle may feel distant, but companies that wait until year-end will be scrambling. The changes are more than a compliance exercise, they directly influence investor confidence, audit scrutiny, and your company's credibility.

Public companies face heightened expectations from investors, regulators, and the PCAOB as ASU 2023-09 comes into effect. RJI CPAs has more than four decades of experience auditing SEC registrants and is registered with the PCAOB. We understand the nuances of ASC 740 and the unique challenges multinationals face in reporting their tax positions.

Don't wait until year-end. Partner with RJI CPAs to prepare for ASU 2023-09 and safeguard your company's credibility in 2025. Call us at (949) 852-1600 or visit [rjicpas.com](http://rjicpas.com) to get started today.



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## About RJI CPAs

Founded in 1980, RJI CPAs offers comprehensive accounting and consulting services and has earned a place on Forbes' list of America's Best Tax and Accounting Firms. Manuel Ramirez, Chairman, has been recognized on Forbes' list of America's Top 200 CPAs and Forbes list of Best-in-State CPAs. As the Southern California member firm of DFK International, a top 10 global accountancy association, we coordinate seamlessly with member firms in key jurisdictions.

# Buchalter

## Beyond the Label: California's Rules Are Changing How Products are Sold Nationwide

Anne Marie Ellis, Buchalter

California is well-known for being a trendsetter in environmental and consumer protection laws. This year California has reshaped how products are designed and packaged through the Extended Producer Responsibility Act (EPR) for packaging, restrictions on Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl substances aka "forever chemicals," the long-standing Proposition 65 warning law, and an increase in false advertising claims.

### Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR)

In 2022, California passed SB 54, which is one of the most ambitious packaging laws in the country. It requires all single-use packaging and single-use plastic food service ware sold in the state to be recyclable or compostable by 2032, with specific recycling targets. Producers must join a Producer Responsibility Organization (the only currently approved organization is Circular Action Alliance), report their packaging and single-use plastic, and pay fees that fund recycling improvements. California is not alone. Oregon, Maine, Colorado, and Washington have also enacted packaging EPR laws, and several other states are considering similar bills. Over time, the goal is to push companies toward simpler, recyclable designs and reduce plastic pollution.

### PFAS Restrictions

PFAS (per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances) are a large class of man-made chemicals used since the 1940s to make products resistant to water, oil, heat, and stains. They have now been linked to health concerns, and many states have enacted bans on these chemicals. California has led with bans on intentionally added PFAS in juvenile products, most textiles, apparel, cosmetics, and food packaging. Many states have also enacted broad restrictions that could eventually ban PFAS across most consumer products. Because PFAS are so persistent, it is difficult to trace their use throughout the supply chain and testing methods are still evolving.

### Proposition 65

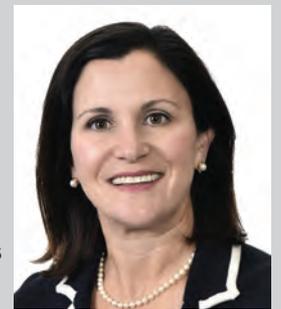
California's Proposition 65 continues to be a regulatory hurdle for businesses. It requires businesses to provide warnings if their products expose consumers to chemicals known to cause cancer, birth defects, or reproductive harm. Over one thousand chemicals are on the list, including metals, phthalates, and PFAS. Enforcement is carried out not only by the state, but also by private parties "acting in the public benefit" who have standing to file notices of violation and lawsuits. A change

to this law in 2025 includes the ability for companies to put the word "CA" before "warning" to signal to consumers that this is a California law. By 2028, companies must replace the vague "short form warning" with a warning that includes a specified chemical.

### False Advertising Trends

Through private litigation, California continues to be an aggressive state for policing false or misleading advertising claims through the Unfair Competition Law. New trends include overstated environmental benefits ("greenwashing"), unsupported health and wellness claims and misrepresenting product attributes such as recyclability or "PFAS-free" status. Businesses are increasingly required to substantiate their marketing with reliable scientific data and to avoid vague or overly broad claims that could mislead consumers. While California typically paves the way for consumer protection laws, businesses must stay vigilant in their nationwide compliance efforts.

Anne Marie Ellis is the California Chair of Buchalter's Products Liability Practice Group and Chair of the Chemical Law & Proposition 65 Industry Group. She represents clients in complex product liability defense, personal injury and commercial litigation, regulatory compliance, and risk management counseling across a wide range of industries. Ellis is nationally recognized by Chambers USA as a leader in Product Liability and Mass Torts (USA – Nationwide). This prestigious ranking reflects a rigorous, independent research process that evaluates attorney experience, client feedback, and peer recognition, and confirms her standing as one of the top practitioners in her field nationwide. Whether defending claims as trial counsel, managing risks associated with allegations of catastrophic injuries and wrongful death, or establishing strategies to prevent and defend California's Proposition 65 claims, Ellis has a reputation for practicality and efficiency in complex, high exposure investigations, litigation, trials and regulatory matters.



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## Celebrating General Counsel Leadership: The Quarterbacks in Business and Dealmaking

This fall, as the Orange County Business Journal recognizes this year's General Counsel honorees, it is a fitting moment to acknowledge the vital leadership they provide. Nowhere is that leadership more evident than in mergers and acquisitions. At Adams Corporate Law, we partner with General Counsel on acquisitions, helping them quarterback the deal—setting the strategy, keeping the team focused, and pushing the deal toward the goal line. Their influence extends well beyond legal oversight—shaping growth strategies, safeguarding value, and ensuring long-term success. In practice, this means anticipating challenges, keeping stakeholders aligned, and playing an indispensable role in moving deals to a successful close.



Addison Adams

At Adams Corporate Law, our M&A team values the trusted partnership we share with General Counsel. Known as the “lawyers who close deals,” we bring volumes of transaction experience to complement their leadership. Our role is often to provide the technical expertise that keeps transactions moving: preparing and reviewing deal documents, negotiating key terms, and identifying risks that could derail progress. We also serve as a sounding board for strategy—helping structure transactions to meet business objectives while protecting our clients' interests. Just as importantly, we collaborate closely with our client's General Counsel to align legal priorities with business goals, ensuring that decision-makers have the clarity and confidence needed at each stage of a deal. If GCs are the quarterbacks, our firm is the special teams unit—stepping in with precision and focus at critical, high-stakes moments to secure the win. Much like special teams can change the outcome of a game, our role in complex transactions is often decisive—helping ensure that the final deal execution supports the long-term goals of the business.

As we celebrate the achievements of General Counsel across Orange County, we also welcome the opportunity to team up on your next deal. If you're preparing for a business sale, acquisition, or other strategic transaction, our team is ready to partner with you. Contact Adams Corporate Law at (714) 619-9360 to learn how we can help you close with confidence.

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Celebrating the

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**Laurie Anne Dee** | OC Investment Management Leader

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**Steven L. Miller** | OC Finance Leader

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## CONGRATULATIONS!

**Bryan Wahl, MD, JD**

General Counsel at Tarsus Pharmaceuticals, Inc.

**Orange County Business Journal  
2025 General Counsel of the Year Nominee**

The Tarsus Team proudly congratulates you on this well-deserved nomination.

We are thrilled to see your unwavering commitment to integrity and principled leadership recognized by the broader OC community. Your insights, expertise, and patient-centric approach are foundational to our success in delivering transformative treatments to patients in need.



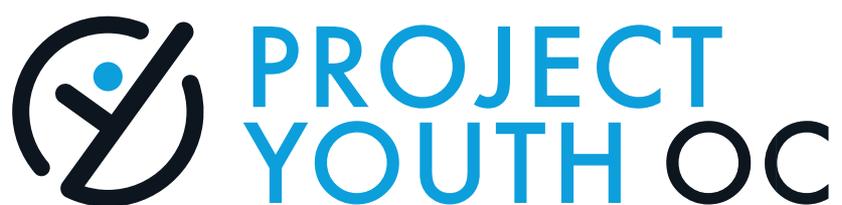
Scan here to learn more about Bryan Wahl and the Tarsus leadership team



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## 2025 General Counsel Bios

### Allied Universal, Irvine

Loretta Cecil, Global General Counsel

Loretta Cecil serves as Allied Universal's chief legal officer, providing strategic legal guidance and overseeing the company's global legal function. Allied Universal is the world's leading security and facility services provider and trusted partner to more than 400 of the FORTUNE 500 delivering unparalleled customer relationships, innovative solutions, cutting-edge smart technologies, and tailored services that enable clients to focus on their core businesses. With operations in over 100 countries, Allied Universal is the third-largest private employer in North America and seventh in the world. Annual revenue is more than \$22 billion. Cecil's leadership and legal expertise have been recognized with multiple honors and distinctions including Corporate Counsel's Women, Power and Influence Lifetime Achievement Award. Cecil has also received 13 national awards for excellence in compliance training; and in 2021, she led a team named Corporate Secretary's Best Compliance & Ethics Program, Corporate Counsel's Compliance Department of the Year, and named a Value Champion by the Association of Corporate Counsel.



expansion of manufacturing capacity from \$120 million to over \$400 million per year and an anticipated 230% increase in revenues over the past six fiscal years. In the past year, Ziebell helped preside over Avid's go-private sale to two private equity firms in an all-cash transaction valued at approximately \$1.1 billion.

### California Pizza Kitchen Inc., Costa Mesa

Kendall Jones, General Counsel

After beginning her career as an associate in "Biglaw" in Atlanta, Georgia, Kendall Jones has worked her way up through the ranks and across the country, joining four state bar associations along the way, to earn her place as general counsel and executive team member at California Pizza Kitchen. As GC of CPK, Jones has shepherded the company through COVID, a bankruptcy, debt financing and capital raises, a ransomware attack, hostile shareholder actions, and most recently the sale of the company, all while maintaining a sense of calm confidence. She has led some significant negotiations for the company, including a sponsorship with the Dodgers and multiple licensing agreements. Jones' resilience, humility, and refusal to take herself too seriously have made her stand out as a relatable, consistent, and accessible leader at CPK. Jones is ready to help lead CPK into its exciting next chapter this year.



### Alpha Motor Corporation, Irvine

Jada (SoYun) Lee, President

Jada S. Lee is the co-founder and president of Alpha Motor Corporation, a privately held EV company headquartered in Irvine, California. A respected corporate attorney licensed in California since 2007, her two-decade legal career includes chief compliance roles in private equity. At Alpha, she has leveraged her expertise in business structuring, negotiations, and regulatory frameworks to shape the company's product and strategic direction, earning her recognition as one of 2024's "Best Entrepreneurs to Watch". Founded in 2020 alongside Edward Lee, Alpha Motor employs around 50 people and has rapidly gained momentum. Under her leadership, the company has transitioned from unveiling retro-inspired concept EVs (Ace, Jax, Wolf, Saga, Rex) to delivering drivable Wolf truck prototypes by mid 2023. Preorder demand surged past 80,000 vehicles by late 2024, and the firm achieved profitability on made to order production within three years. Recent milestones include completion of the Wolf Plus prototype showcased to over 500,000 attendees at Seoul's 2023 Mobility Show, domestic manufacturing scaling, and strategic partnerships boosting modular production. Lee continues to drive Alpha's vision of accessible, sustainable EV mobility.



### Caylent, Inc., Irvine

Lisa Cohrs, General Counsel & Chief People Officer

Lisa Cohrs is the general counsel and chief people officer at Caylent, a leading cloud-native services company specializing in DevOps, application modernization, AI, and data platforms on AWS. With more than 700 employees and 80% revenue growth in 2024, Caylent supports high-growth and enterprise customers in accelerating their cloud journeys with engineering excellence and deep AWS expertise. The company has earned multiple AWS Partner Awards, reflecting its innovation and customer impact across the cloud ecosystem. As General Counsel, Cohrs oversees all legal, regulatory, and compliance matters for Caylent, including global employment law, data privacy, commercial contracting, and risk management. She plays a strategic role in supporting the company's international growth and ensuring legal alignment with evolving business operations. In her dual role, Cohrs also leads the People, Talent Acquisition, and IT teams. She is passionate about scaling culture, enabling high-performing teams, and building inclusive workplaces. Her leadership ensures Caylent remains not only a top AWS partner, but also a responsible and exceptional place to work and grow.



### Alteryx, Irvine

Christopher Lal, Chief Legal Officer

Christopher Lal is currently the chief legal officer of Alteryx, where he has led the company through transformative stages of growth and innovation. Lal joined Alteryx in August 2016 and successfully guided Alteryx through a successful IPO in March 2017. After the IPO, Lal was a trusted advisor to the board of directors and executive team and built and mentored a top-notch legal team. Lal advanced corporate governance, risk management, and AI adoption and helped position Alteryx as a leader in trusted, responsible data analytics and AI solutions. After success as a public company, in 2023, Lal led Alteryx in its \$4.4 billion take private transaction with Clearlake Capital and Insight Partners and continues with the Company today. Prior to joining Alteryx, he served as general counsel for several companies, including Tilly's, Sunstone Hotel Investors, and RemedyTemp and began his career at O'Melveny & Myers. A longtime member of the Orange County legal community, Lal is also an active board member for the Forum for Corporate Directors and The Business Software Alliance and is a founding member of Tech GC, a network of technology company general counsels. He was named OCBJ General Counsel of the Year in 2014 and was recognized by the Daily Journal as one of California's Top 100 Lawyers.



### Clean Energy Fuels Corp., Newport Beach

Katie Klein, Deputy General Counsel

Katie Klein has served in positions of increasing responsibility with Clean Energy since 2009 and previously was an associate at the international law firm Milbank LLP. As the company's lead commercial transactions attorney for many years, Klein has handled the company's most complicated and strategic business deals throughout the organization's growth and evolution. She also contributes beyond her core commercial role in areas such as litigation, employment law, privacy, compliance, real estate, financings, and legal operations. During her tenure, Klein has helped the company become a leader in decarbonizing transportation through the development, procurement, delivery, and distribution of renewable natural gas (RNG) in transportation markets. RNG is a sustainable fuel derived from capturing methane from organic waste. Clean Energy allows thousands of vehicles, from airport shuttles to city buses to waste and heavy-duty trucks, to reduce their amount of climate-harming greenhouse gas. The company operates a vast network of fueling stations across the U.S. and Canada as well as RNG production facilities at dairy farms.



### Avid Bioservices, Inc., Tustin

Mark Ziebell, General Counsel & Corporate Secretary

Mark Ziebell joined Avid in 2012 as general counsel and corporate secretary, establishing the in-house legal function. Ziebell is a key member of Avid's executive leadership team and a trusted advisor to the Board. For most of his tenure, Ziebell has been the sole in-house lawyer, responsible for all legal matters, including governance, SEC compliance, capital raising, contracting and insurance. Ziebell was instrumental in Avid's phase III clinical trial of its cancer drug negotiating all contracts for over 150 trial sites in 16 countries. Following the unsuccessful phase III trial, Ziebell played a lead role in settling an activist stockholder campaign, disposition of Avid's R&D assets and transitioning to a CDMO manufacturing biologics. Thereafter, Ziebell has overseen approximately \$400 million in equity and debt financings, the



### Ducommun Incorporated, Costa Mesa

Rajiv Tata, Vice President, General Counsel & Corporate Secretary

Ducommun Incorporated attained a 22% increase in stock price between December 31st of 2023 and 2024, a 24% increase in its market capitalization over the prior year, all-time high revenues of \$786.6 million and an impressive 21% increase in gross profit over the prior year. Rajiv Tata is responsible for and oversees Ducommun's legal function, including contract review, employment, corporate governance, SEC compliance, real estate transactions, privacy, litigation and other policy issues, having built the company's legal team from scratch. After joining the company in 2017, he also created and developed the company's environmental, social and governance program, achieving a 50% decrease in Scope 1 and 2 greenhouse gas emissions and an 86% decrease in recordable safety incidents, both since



# RUTAN

## ORANGE COUNTY

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**CONGRATULATIONS TO ALL THE NOMINEES AND  
WINNERS OF THE 2025 OCBJ GC OF THE YEAR AWARDS!**



**Gloria Lee**

Client Relations Partner  
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**Joe Maga**

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## 2025 General Counsel Bios

2019. In addition, Tata supports Ducommun's mergers and acquisitions team, with five successful transactions closed since 2017 and which have played a significant role in Ducommun's success and is a cornerstone of the company's future growth strategy. In 2021, Tata helped the company complete a sale-leaseback transaction of Ducommun's Gardena performance center, the first in the long history of the company, and which generated approximately \$110 million in net, after tax proceeds. More recently, over the first half of 2025, Tata successfully helped navigate the imposition of tariffs by the new administration with minimal impacts to the Company.

### ECOS, Cypress

*Somath Hasina-Cabrales, Associate Corporate Counsel*

Somath Hasina-Cabrales is the associate corporate counsel at ECOS, a privately held American company known for its environmentally friendly cleaning products, headquartered in Cypress, California. Her journey with ECOS began while she was a law student at Chapman University School of Law, where she joined the company as a legal extern. She continued working with ECOS throughout her studies and transitioned into a full-time attorney role upon graduation. Since then, Hasina-Cabrales has served as the right hand to the general counsel, overseeing the company's day-to-day legal operations across its four U.S. manufacturing facilities, international footprint, and sales in over 65 countries. In collaboration with the general counsel, she has helped establish and refine the department's operational processes to support the company's continued growth and legal compliance. Hasina-Cabrales works closely with the executive leadership team and department heads across the company, aligning legal strategy with business objectives to effectively mitigate risk while supporting ECOS's mission and global growth.



### First American Financial Corporation, Santa Ana

*Lisa Cornehl, Senior Vice President, Chief Legal Officer & Secretary*

Lisa Cornehl is a shrewd legal strategist who serves as the senior vice president, chief legal officer, and corporate secretary of First American Financial Company, a leading provider of title insurance, settlement services, and risk solutions for real estate transactions. In her day-to-day role, Cornehl oversees complex litigation matters, claims management, and regulatory compliance while serving as a partner to executive leadership during crucial decision-making moments. Cornehl plays a critical role in helping First American deliver on its purpose—providing the certainty and trust to power seamless real estate transactions. Prior to this role, she served as First American's deputy general counsel, litigation, and chief privacy officer, joining the company in 2011 as senior litigation counsel. Previously, she worked at Mayer Brown LLP, a leading international law firm. Outside of her work with First American, Cornehl is on the board of directors for Connections for Children, a non-profit childcare resource and referral agency serving parents, childcare providers, and educators. She received her JD from Loyola Law School and BS at Purdue University.



### First Team Real Estate, Newport Beach

*Hila Pooli, General Counsel*

Leading and managing First Team's Legal and Risk Management Department, Hila Pooli provides legal advice to the company's corporate department, high-level management, and approximately 2,200 agents with respect to matters of litigation and risk management. Previously, she successfully represented First Team's agents and managers as First Team's outside legal counsel at Manning and Kass Ramirez Ellrod Trestler LLP. Pooli was also voted TOP 50 Attorneys of Los Angeles in 2023. Selected as a 2021 Southern California Super Lawyer, a distinction reserved for only 2.5% of attorneys who exhibit excellence in practice in Southern California, Pooli is the best in the business with a wealth of knowledge and experience in real estate law.



### Golden State Foods, Irvine

*John E. Page, Esq., Executive Vice President & Chief Administrative Officer*

John E. Page, Esq. leads GSF's Legal Department and Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives, including the GSF Foundation, in addition to providing oversight of the company's risk management; food safety, quality and regulatory (FSQR); environment, health and safety (EHS); and sustainability. A GSF associate for more than 20 years, Page was instrumental in GSF earning customer recognition in 2022 with McDonald's first-



ever Global DE&I Award, by guiding the advancement of the company's environmental initiatives, inclusion and fair treatment, and community involvement. Page also serves as the GSF Foundation's CEO and Chairman of the Board of Directors. One of the largest diversified suppliers to the foodservice industry, Golden State Foods is a multi-national company that's values-based with proven performance in superior quality, innovation, and customer service. Established in 1947, GSF currently services more than 200 leading brands (over 125,000 restaurants/stores on five continents) from its 50 locations. GSF earned the 2024 US Best Managed Company designation, an award sponsored by Deloitte\* Private and The Wall Street Journal to recognize the achievements of U.S. private companies and the successes of their management teams.

### Habit Burger & Grill, Irvine

*Jason Oviatt, Chief People & Legal Officer*

As the chief people & legal officer of Habit Burger & Grill, a leading fast-casual "better burger" brand with nearly 400 restaurants across 14 states, Jason Oviatt leads the overall legal strategy, compliance, and people-first initiatives. He joined the brand in 2020 as its first chief legal officer and has grown and developed the legal team over the last five years to best support the business. In 2023 his role was also expanded to oversee HR. Under his leadership, the legal team has become a trusted business partner and strategic advisor in key legal areas such as franchise, employment, litigation, real estate, contracts, and advertising. Before joining the Habit, Oviatt spent 14 years at Taco Bell in a variety of senior legal roles, most recently serving as director & division counsel. While at Taco Bell, he also contributed to the academic community as an adjunct professor at Chapman University School of Law from 2015–2019.



### Hoag Memorial Hospital Presbyterian, Newport Beach

*Eric Cheung, SVP - General Counsel & Chief Legal Officer*

Eric W. Cheung is senior vice president, chief legal officer, and general counsel of Hoag Memorial Hospital Presbyterian, where he leads legal strategy, enterprise risk, and governance for one of California's most respected nonprofit health care organizations. Joining Hoag as its first general counsel in nearly a decade, Cheung played a pivotal role in restoring the organization's independence and designing the governance infrastructure for its bright and bold future ahead. As a member of Hoag's senior leadership team, Cheung helps shape strategic initiatives that advance patient-centered compassionate care, growth, quality, and innovation. He guided the legal and risk framework for major capital financings and the Sun Family Campus expansion in Irvine, while also supporting Hoag's migration to its own electronic health record instance, an effort that strengthened data integrity and operational resilience. In a post COVID era defined by workforce, cost, and regulatory pressures, Cheung's counsel has helped Hoag distinguish itself by pairing disciplined stewardship with enhanced digital access. The first attorney in his family, Cheung began his career as a business litigator before transitioning to health care law, driven by a passion for improving care delivery.



### Hydrfacial LLC, Long Beach

*Paul Bokota, SVP & General Counsel*

Paul Bokota has been with Hydrfacial LLC for five years. He took the company public through a De-SPAC in May 2021, leading to what was in 2021 the most successful DE-SPAC on Wall Street. Bokota leads a legal department with members in the US, EMEA, and APAC and overseas all legal issues globally. That includes directing all Securities compliance efforts, managing a multimillion-dollar IP portfolio, overseeing all litigation, managing FDA compliance, interfacing regularly with the Board of Directors, and ensuring compliance with myriad laws in over 100 countries. Bokota is the longest-tenured member of the Company's Executive Committee and is a trusted business leader who happens to be the company's lead attorney. One month after going public, Bokota personally managed the acquisition of four international distributors to expand the company's global footprint and then directed the acquisition of a microneedling company to expand the company's offerings.



### LANVIN Group, Anaheim

*Christina Zabat-Fran, General Counsel & Corporate Secretary*

Christina Zabat-Fran is general counsel (North America) and corporate secretary of LANVIN Group (NYSE: LANV), where she led the Group's landmark 2022 de-SPAC NYSE listing, raised \$150 million, upgraded global governance, and supported record revenues of €422 million (+37%). She built



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## 2025 General Counsel Bios

an enterprise compliance program across more than 60 countries, negotiated margin-enhancing licensing and ambassador deals, and launched data-driven loss prevention programs. Formerly Global GC of St. John Knits, she reengineered international distribution and completed refinancing that preserved over 1,000 North American manufacturing jobs. In 2024, Zabat-Fran became president of the Orange County Bar Association—its first Filipino American president—driving record membership growth and elevating in-house counsel engagement. She serves on boards including the Public Law Center and Collaborative Courts Foundation and leads the OCBA Charitable Fund (2025), delivering its highest-grossing fundraising year. Honors include Global Counsel Awards shortlist, ABA Top 40 Lawyers on the Rise, American Lawyer GC of the Year finalist, ADL Marcus Kaufman Jurisprudence Award, and 50/50 Women on Boards “Top 50 Women to Watch.” She is a published artist, Wine Scholar, and Taekwondo world champion.

### **loanDepot.com, LLC, Irvine**

*Edgar Martinez, Senior Counsel*



Edgar Martinez is a senior counsel with loanDepot.com, LLC, an Irvine-based national mortgage lender and real estate services provider. Martinez is a versatile attorney and key member of loanDepot’s legal team, supporting a range of internal clients across product, operations, information technology, risk, compliance, marketing, and sales departments. Before loanDepot, Martinez served as in-house litigation and compliance counsel with Healthpeak, a health care real estate investment trust. He also served as a senior counsel with American Advisors Group, a reverse mortgage lender, advising on compliance and transactional matters. Martinez began his legal career with O’Melveny & Myers, LLP’s Newport Beach office, where he counseled mortgage and banking clients on regulatory compliance and defended financial services providers in consumer class actions across the country.

### **MBK Real Estate Companies, Irvine**

*Anita Hsu, Senior Vice President & Chief Legal Officer*



Anita Hsu serves as the senior vice president and chief legal officer of MBK Real Estate Companies, a diversified real estate firm owned by Mitsui & Co., Ltd. She oversees all legal matters for MBK and its subsidiaries, including MBK Senior Living, MBK Rental Living, MBK Homes, and MBK Industrial Properties, and also acts as the company’s chief compliance officer. Prior to joining MBK, Hsu was a partner at Manatt, Phelps & Phillips, LLP, where she specialized in complex real estate transactions. She also served as in-house legal counsel for an alternative energy company. Hsu earned her law degree from the University of California, Berkeley School of Law, and graduated highest honors (summa cum laude) with a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from the same institution. She is a recipient of the prestigious Paul and Daisy Soros Fellowship for New Americans.

### **Medtronic, Irvine**

*Mark Blake, Head of IP Litigation*



Mark Blake is the head of worldwide IP litigation for Medtronic, one of the world’s largest and most respected medical device companies. This, in itself, is a major accomplishment for a patent litigator who has spent his entire career in Orange County. Some of the numbers that show the scope of Blake’s position, Medtronic has:

- Over 43,000 active patent matters
- Over 95,000 employees across 150 countries worldwide
- Over 13,000 scientists and engineers
- At least 191 active clinical trials

Blake oversees cases of all types, including district court cases throughout the US, Federal Circuit appeals, USPTO and PTAB matters (including IPRs), and European cases in the Unified Patent Court. In the past 5 years, Blake has overseen patent trials in six different countries, and managed litigations pending in 14 additional countries. The scope of his current duties reflects his broad and deep experience as a patent litigator at Howrey, Shepard Mullin, and Jones Day, and at in-house positions at Orange County’s biggest technology companies, Broadcom, Masimo, Edwards Lifesciences and now Medtronic since 2024. Most recently, Blake oversaw the successful appeal of a \$125 million judgment awarded to Colibri Heart Valve LLC after an Orange County jury trial. Blake’s legal team not only overturned the verdict but convinced the Federal Circuit to order a finding of non-infringement, effectively ending the case. This victory in Blake’s relatively new position reflects some of his greatest strengths, technical acumen, insightful judgment, and strong leadership.

### **M S International, Inc. (“MSI”), Orange**

*Monica Johnson, General Counsel*

Serving as general counsel of M S International, Inc. (“MSI”), Monica Johnson is an accomplished executive leader with strong senior management and corporate board and governance experience with global responsibility for MSI’s legal affairs. An accomplished attorney with experience in a broad range of industries, including food service, retail, technology, manufacturing, and supply chain/logistics, she is a valued business partner and trusted advisor on both legal and business matters. Johnson proactively works to find innovative business solutions that appropriately balance sound business judgment, thorough legal analysis and real-world considerations. Immediately prior to joining MSI, she served as chief legal officer and corporate secretary for Darigold, general counsel at Bonduelle Americas, assistant general counsel/assistant corporate secretary at Ventura Foods, and previously served as senior counsel at Western Digital. She currently serves as a board member for the ACC Foundation and Solar Rollers. Johnson previously served on the board of the ACC-SoCal and ACC Washington. She received her JD from Southwestern University School of Law and holds a BA in Rhetoric/Communications and Political Science from U.C. Davis.



### **Olen Properties, Newport Beach**

*Julie Ault-Snyder, General Counsel*



Olen Properties recently celebrated its 50th anniversary. Julie Ault-Snyder, general counsel, has played a key role in Olen’s success, contributing to the company’s growth for nearly two decades. Since its founding in 1974, Olen has expanded from a single business park to a privately held portfolio of over 30 million square feet across eight states. Headquartered in Newport Beach, California, and now employing more than 500 people, Olen attributes its success to a disciplined investment approach, methodical growth, and a strong team culture. Ault-Snyder has helped lead Olen through a dynamic real estate landscape, managing complex legal matters and high-stakes transactions. Her expertise in real estate law, risk management, and strategic counseling has been instrumental to the company’s resilience and expansion. Beyond her legal acumen, Ault-Snyder is known for her professionalism, diplomacy, and dedication to fostering a collaborative workplace. Her steady leadership and genuine care for colleagues and the broader community make her both a trusted advisor and a respected leader within Olen and the industry.

### **Orange County Department of Education/Orange County Board of Education, Costa Mesa**

*Greg Rolan, Orange County Department of Education General Counsel*

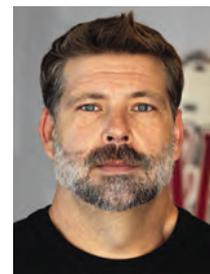
Greg Rolan served California public school districts for approximately 30 years. He was the chairman of his former firm’s public sector practice group and a recognized statewide expert in board governance, public records, technology, and open meeting laws. Rolan had the opportunity to be a presenter and commentator on novel education law issues and has published more than 50 articles concerning education law and policy. He was appointed general counsel to the Orange County Department of Education in October 2024. Rolan lives in Huntington Beach with his wife Marisol.



### **P&P Imports LLC, Irvine**

*Casey Kempner, Chief Legal Officer & General Counsel*

Casey Kempner is the general counsel of P&P Imports LLC, where he leads a dynamic legal department consisting of three members. Under his leadership, Kempner has achieved significant legal victories, including a complete jury verdict this year in which the defendant was found guilty of willful infringement. Additionally, he successfully won a motion to dismiss a baseless patent infringement suit, further solidifying his reputation for robust legal defense. Kempner has also been instrumental in the company’s growth, overseeing the expansion of P&P Imports’ product portfolio to over 1,000 SKUs. His strategic guidance has resulted in the filing of over 200 patents, the registration of more than 100 trademarks, and nearly 1,000 copyright registrations, greatly enhancing the company’s intellectual property portfolio. Kempner’s contributions have been pivotal in securing and protecting the company’s innovations and market position.



### **Pacific Life, Newport Beach**

*Joe Tortorelli, AVP & Managing Assistant General Counsel*

Pacific Life provides a variety of products and services designed to help individuals and businesses in the retail, institutional, workforce benefits, and reinsurance markets achieve financial security. Pacific Life offers innovative life

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## 2025 General Counsel Bios

insurance and annuity solutions, as well as mutual funds, that provide value and financial security for current and future generations. Supporting our policyholders for nearly 160 years, Pacific Life is a Fortune 500 company headquartered in Newport Beach, California. As a mutual holding company, Pacific Life's unique holding structure enables the company to focus on long-term goals to maximize customer value while ensuring it meets the needs of members for generations to come. For additional information, including current financial strength ratings, visit [www.PacificLife.com](http://www.PacificLife.com).

2024 business highlights:

- \$239 billion in company assets
- \$21 billion in benefits paid
- \$16 billion in equity
- \$1.5 trillion in life insurance in force
- \$16 billion in revenues
- \$9.1 million in global charitable giving
- 1 million in-force members
- 272 FORTUNE 500 company by total revenue rank (June 2025)
- 4,300-plus global employees
- 8 consecutive years named as one of the World's Most Ethical Companies by Ethisphere Institute

### Pacific Life, Newport Beach

*Alison Ryan, AVP & Managing Assistant General Counsel*

Alison Ryan serves as managing assistant general counsel II at Pacific Life, a Fortune 500 financial services company headquartered in Newport Beach. Ryan is a key member of the organization's legal team, supporting the Consumer Markets business where she provides legal counsel for the company's variable annuity, registered index-linked annuity (RILA), variable life and corporate-owned life insurance products. She also oversees a team dedicated to supporting the organization's variable products and proprietary mutual funds. Ryan has demonstrated exceptional leadership across a wide range of high-profile initiatives, most notably, leading Pacific Life's launch of its first RILA product. Under her guidance, the company became the first to file a RILA on the SEC's new registration form. Previously, Ryan worked at Corebridge Financial (previously, AIG Life & Retirement division) and Transamerica where she provided advice regarding issues relating to retirement offerings, including advice under federal securities laws, FINRA rules, state insurance laws and limited aspects of ERISA. She has been and continues to be involved in numerous leading industry organizations.



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### Planned Parenthood of Orange and San Bernardino Counties, Anaheim

*Ramona Thomas, General Counsel & Vice President of Risk and Compliance*

Ramona Thomas is the general counsel and vice president of Risk & Compliance for Planned Parenthood of Orange and San Bernardino Counties (PPOSBC). PPOSBC is one of the largest Planned Parenthood affiliates in the nation by patient volume and number of services, with over 270,000 medical visits last year. PPOSBC doctors, nurse practitioners, and other healthcare professionals across nine health centers provide birth control, cancer screening including Pap tests and breast exams, STI testing and treatment, and abortion services to 130,000 local patients each year. PPOSBC also provides comprehensive primary care, online mental health, and WIC services including breastfeeding support, as well as online birth control and UTI care through the Planned Parenthood Direct app. Services are high-quality, confidential, and affordable. No one is turned away, regardless of insurance, income, or immigration status. Over the past two years, Thomas has successfully fought politically motivated efforts to illegally block the building of a Planned Parenthood health center in the city of Fontana, and continued to push back against partisan federal attacks on reproductive healthcare access.



### Prospera Hotels, Orange

*Wendy Huang, General Counsel*

Wendy Huang is general counsel of Prospera Hotels, a leading hotel investment, development, and management company headquartered in Orange. Huang is one of the most experienced real estate general counsels in the region, with more than 30 years of legal practice spanning office, retail, hotel, and industrial acquisitions and dispositions. At Prospera, she has successfully led complex transactions and high-stakes litigation, contributing directly to the company's growth and continued expansion across Southern California. As both general counsel and an experienced litigator, Huang has uniquely and successfully represented her companies in numerous real estate litigation matters over three decades, which is an uncommon accomplishment among in-house counsel. Prior to Prospera, she served as executive vice president and general counsel at Crown Realty & Development and as general counsel at Olen Properties. Huang has made lasting contributions to the legal and civic community. As the long-term co-editor-in-chief of California Litigation Review, Huang edited of the most widely read law reviews by California judges and lawyers. She also served on the executive committee and advisor to the Litigation Section of the California State Bar and California Lawyers Association. Huang was the former president of the Organization of Chinese Americans, Greater Los Angeles Chapter, one of the most prominent civil rights and community organizations in Southern California.



### PACSUN, Anaheim

*Mark Harrington, General Counsel and Corporate Secretary*

Mark Harrington is the SVP, general counsel and corporate secretary of Anaheim-based retailer, Pacific Sunwear of California ("Pacsun"), where he has been for the past six years. He has over 20 years of general counsel experience, serving as the GC of various publicly-traded, PE-owned and start-up companies. In addition to Pacsun, Harrington's in-house experience includes Intel Corporation, Google, Guidance Software, Greenwave Systems, United Online, and Ticketmaster. He is a graduate of Southwestern Law School and UCLA and resides in Newport Beach.



### Petalfast Inc., Irvine

*Arun Kurichety, COO & General Counsel*

Arun Kurichety is a seasoned leader, corporate executive, and attorney with more than 20 years of corporate transactional and restructuring experience, with specializations in regulated and emerging industries. In 2020, he co-founded Petalfast, a go-to-market sales and distribution company serving high-growth consumer brands. As chief operating officer and general counsel, Kurichety drives strategic growth while leading and managing the company's legal, operational, and compliance functions. He has personally structured and negotiated all aspects of the business from its formation, including numerous equity raises, multiple debt transactions, and hundreds of custom partnership agreements. Kurichety has been the architect of building Petalfast from a pre-revenue start-up to an established industry leader with a team of over 80 employees serving a portfolio of major consumer brands. Kurichety has led the company's transformation into a multi-state enterprise, including the acquisition of a company in Arizona and launching operations in New York. He oversees compliance with the distinct laws and regulations of each state in which the company operates, a skill that few people have mastered in the highly regulated cannabis industry. By "Leading with the Law" ensures legal and operational



### Sandisk Corporation (NASDAQ: SNDK), Irvine

*Jae Park, Vice President & Assistant General Counsel*

Jae Park is a vice president and assistant general counsel at Sandisk Corporation and leads the Strategic Transactions and Strategic Alliances Group of Sandisk. Park's practice focuses on a wide range of general corporate law, with an emphasis on mergers and acquisitions, joint ventures, venture capital, and other strategic corporate transactions. Prior to his current position, Park was a senior associate in the corporate transaction groups of Latham & Watkins and Squire Patton Boggs. In his position with Sandisk, Park has handled a wide array of corporate transactions in the data storage and semiconductor industries, including acquisitions of both public and private companies, divestitures, venture capital investments, joint venture transactions, and private equity investments. Park is also an important leader in executing Sandisk's strategic plans, including negotiating and managing Sandisk's critical joint ventures with its offshore partners. Park received his B.A. from Princeton University in 1999 and his J.D. from Duke University Law School in 2004.



### SmartStop Self Storage REIT, Inc., Ladera Ranch

*Nicholas Look, General Counsel*

Nicholas Look is the general counsel and secretary of SmartStop Self Storage REIT, Inc. (NYSE: SMA), a public real estate investment trust that recently completed its listing on the New York Stock Exchange. SmartStop has a growing portfolio of self-storage facilities across the U.S. and Canada. Since joining SmartStop in 2019, Look has overseen the legal strategy behind several transformative transactions, including over \$1 billion in strategic mergers, more than \$2 billion in debt and private financing



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- Intellectual Property
- Labor + Employment
- Multifamily Housing Finance
- Real Estate
- Technology

## 2025 General Counsel Bios

deals and the transition from an externally advised entity to a fully internalized, self-managed REIT. Most recently, in April 2025, Look and his legal team oversaw the successful completion of the Company's listing on the NYSE and corresponding underwritten public offering of \$930 million. SmartStop now manages over 225 self-storage facilities in 23 states, the District of Columbia, and Canada and continues to expand through organic growth and acquisitions. Look has accomplished this with a lean in-house legal team, demonstrating sharp judgment in resource allocation, risk management, and operational efficiency. His collaborative approach and business-minded legal acumen have played a vital role in SmartStop's evolution into a leading player in the self-storage industry.

**Smile Brands Inc., Costa Mesa**

*Victoria Harvey, Senior Vice President & Chief Legal Officer*

As SVP & CLO of Smile Brands Inc., for the past 11.5 years, Victoria Harvey has led the company through transformational growth, including one of the largest mergers in the dental sector with the acquisition of Midwest Dental. Harvey oversees legal, compliance, risk management, and government affairs for a national platform supporting over 650 affiliated dental offices, more than 7,000 employees, and over 175 legal entities in 28 states. Her leadership has guided the company through private equity transitions, Covid-19 shut-down/a complex post-pandemic recovery, various complex litigation matters and government investigations, and evolving healthcare regulatory and lobbying landscapes. Beyond legal strategy, she has prioritized building a high-performing, business-aligned legal department recognized for its pragmatic, solutions-driven approach. She has also mentored legal and cross-functional leaders, fostering strong partnerships and a culture of accountability. In addition to her daily role as CLO, she supports and serves as a board director on the company's global Smiles for Everyone Foundation, which has delivered over \$100 million in donated dental care. Through every phase of growth, her focus remains on empowering people, providing Smiles for Everyone support to clinical and operational colleagues so that Smile's affiliated providers can continue to expand access to care.

**St. George & Carnegie Nautilus Global Solutions LLC, Newport Coast**

*Ardelle St. George, Managing Partner, President, & CEO*

As managing partner of her law firm, St. George & Carnegie and solutions & licensing Company, Nautilus Global Solutions, LLC, Ardelle St. George supports clients as general counsel, in transforming their businesses into the future economy. St. George is transitioning her Executive Certifications from Harvard into essential areas for businesses today—with significant programs, opportunities, and initiatives in each of her areas of Certification—cybersecurity, experiential/digital transformation, sustainability and artificial intelligence (including AR, VR and mixed/extended reality,) enhancing her JD and MBA degrees. St. George has established these areas as pillars of her law firm and solutions & licensing company and she provides a wide range of legal, business and educator experience and services to assist clients with their experiential/digital transformation into our new economy. She has been launching THE WAVE CONNECTION®, a multimedia platform to complement her legal and business practice, showcasing and commercializing the innovation and leadership of clients and providing services for their transformation into the future economy utilizing advanced technology and innovation (e.g., Artificial Intelligence, digital transformation.) St. George brings global experience for advanced technology/innovation, education, healthcare/medical technical devices, broadcasting & entertainment, real estate, health food industry, renewable energy, sustainability/environmental, aerospace and other areas. St. George's legal/business/educator expertise includes general counsel, executive & board governance/compliance, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, intellectual property, brand management, regulatory, licensing, experiential/digital transformation, sustainability, M&A, real estate and dispute resolution/litigation support & strategy.

**Stratus Financial, Newport Beach**

*Don Ho, General Counsel*

Don Ho serves as general counsel for Stratus Financial, a leading aviation-focused financial services company that provides innovative student lending and financing solutions for aspiring pilots and flight schools across the United States. Stratus has grown rapidly in recent years, supporting thousands of students through strategic partnerships with



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**NICHOLAS LOOK**

General Counsel & Secretary

## Honoring Leadership in Law: Nominee for the 2025 Orange County Business Journal General Counsel Awards

Congratulations to Nicholas Look, General Counsel, on his nomination for the Orange County Business Journal's General Counsel Awards! Nicholas has been instrumental in SmartStop's evolution from a privately held company to its listing on the New York Stock Exchange in April 2025, providing the legal expertise and strategic guidance necessary to navigate complex regulatory and governance requirements. His steady leadership and commitment to excellence have been critical in supporting SmartStop's growth and long-term success. We are proud to recognize Nicholas for this well-deserved honor and thank him for his continued contributions.

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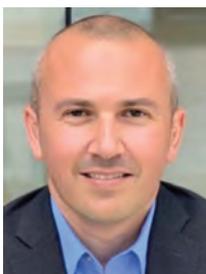
## 2025 General Counsel Bios

aviation institutions and national lenders. The company currently operates in more than 40 states and has funded over \$100 million in student loans since its inception. As general counsel, Ho oversees all legal matters including regulatory compliance, credit policy, licensing, corporate governance, contract negotiation, and investor relations. He has been instrumental in navigating complex multi-state regulatory frameworks, structuring private credit and warehouse line agreements, and mitigating litigation risk while enabling fast-paced operational growth. Ho is a key member of the executive leadership team and has played a pivotal role in scaling Stratus's legal infrastructure during a time of significant expansion. His balanced approach to legal strategy and business execution continues to support the company's mission of transforming aviation financing.

### Super73, Inc., San Clemente

*Joseph Geisman, General Counsel*

Joe Geisman has more than 25 years of experience serving as in-house and outside counsel to consumer products, media and technology companies. He is general counsel at Super73, Inc., an American lifestyle adventure brand based in Orange County, California. Geisman provides transactional support to the company on day-to-day legal matters, and works with stakeholders on initiatives related to manufacturing, logistics, licensing, sales and distribution. As in house counsel, Geisman has worked with some of the most well-known companies and brands in the world, serving as vice president, deputy general counsel at Playboy (a lifestyle and media company that reaches a global audience through a diverse portfolio of consumer products, content, lifestyle, gaming, and hospitality offerings) and senior vice president, Global Content and Intellectual Property Protection at MGM Studios (a leading entertainment company engaged in the development, production, distribution and acquisition of motion picture, television, and multimedia content). Geisman's private practice experience includes serving as of counsel to Greenberg Traurig, LLP, having started his legal career as an Associate at Loeb & Loeb LLP.



### Tarsus Pharmaceuticals, Irvine

*Bryan Wahl, M.D., J.D.*

Bryan W. Wahl, MD, JD, is general counsel of Tarsus Pharmaceuticals, a

commercial-stage biopharmaceutical company pioneering category-creating treatments in eye care and beyond. Since its founding in 2016, Tarsus has grown to nearly 350 employees and, in 2023, launched XDEMZY®—the first and only FDA-approved treatment for Demodex blepharitis, a novel therapeutic category. A board-certified practicing physician and award-winning attorney, Dr. Wahl earned his medical degree at 21 and a law degree from UC Berkeley at age 24. By 33, he became a partner at Knobbe Martens LLP, advising biotech and medical device companies on IP strategy, financings, and transactions worth billions of dollars. At Tarsus, he leads Legal, Compliance, and Innovation (a team of 13), and is a key advisor to the Board. As one of the few general counsels in the biopharmaceutical industry who is also a physician, Dr. Wahl brings a holistic lens to regulatory risk, product development and strategic growth. Dr. Wahl is also a respected mentor and community leader, instrumental in supporting other budding innovators and shaping the future of Tarsus.



### Terumo Neuro (formerly MicroVenton, Inc.), Aliso Viejo

*Laura Vega, Deputy General Counsel & Senior Director, Head of Legal Affairs*

Laura Vega is deputy general counsel and head of legal affairs at Terumo Neuro, a Terumo Group company headquartered in Aliso Viejo, California. Terumo Neuro develops and markets innovative medical devices for the treatment of cerebrovascular diseases and is part of Terumo Corporation, a global medical technology leader based in Tokyo with over 30,000 employees worldwide and more than 200 subsidiaries. Since joining in 2022, Vega has led transformative legal initiatives that have supported the company's rapid growth, and multiple product launches, including the global rebranding efforts and the innovative logistics and distribution strategy. Vega has implemented AI-powered legal tools, streamlined operations, and significantly reduced outside counsel spend. She has also led complex M&A transactions, internal investigations, and global compliance initiatives. A champion of innovation and inclusion, Vega has built a high-performing legal team recognized for its strategic impact and collaborative culture, positioning Terumo Neuro for continued success in a highly regulated, fast-evolving industry.



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2025 General Counsel Bios

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2025 ORANGE COUNTY BUSINESS JOURNAL  
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Ushio America, Inc., Cypress

Ako Shimada, Vice President, General Counsel & Corporate Secretary



Ako Shimada is a seasoned legal executive with more than 20 years of experience shaping global corporate strategies and ensuring rigorous compliance for leading internal organizations. As general counsel for Ushio America and Ushio Europe Group, she oversees legal and regulatory affairs across North America and Europe, with expertise in corporate governance, risk management, intellectual property, and complex M&A transactions. In addition to her in-house legal responsibilities, Shimada serves as an independent board director at Fujitec Co., LTD (6406 TYO), a leading manufacturer of elevators and escalators with global operations and a \$3.3 billion market cap (as of June 2025). She chairs the company's Nomination and Compensation Advisory Committee and leverages her international legal experience to enhance Fujitec's corporate governance and mid to long-term corporate value. Fluent in both English and Japanese, Shimada is a respected voice on international legal issues and DEIB (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging). Shimada has significantly impacted the legal community through her leadership roles within the Association of Corporate Counsel (ACC SoCal) and the U.S.-Japan Council.

Wells Fargo Bank, N.A., Los Angeles

Kristin Godeke, Assistant General Counsel, Vice President



Committed to giving back to the community, Kristin Godeke currently teaches business law ethics at a Western State College of Law. She has previously chaired sub committees of the Bank's Diversity and Inclusion council and served as the chair of the Appellate and Corporate Law sections of the Orange County Bar Association. Godeke received her undergraduate degree at Occidental College and her J.D. from Western State.

Willow Innovations, Mountain View

Scott Becker, General Counsel & Corporate Secretary

As general counsel of Willow Innovations, a high-growth consumer medtech

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# When Integrity Leads, Recognition Follows.

We are incredibly proud to celebrate Robert Davis on his well-earned nomination for **Orange County Business Journal's General Counsel of the Year** award. His steadfast commitment to always doing what's right has set the standard for integrity and ethical leadership across our organization. In a world where the right path isn't always the easiest, he has never wavered. His guidance, wisdom, and moral compass continue to inspire everyone who works with him.

This nomination is more than recognition. It's a reflection of the values he lives by every day.

Help us congratulate Robert, no one deserves it more.



*Robert Davis, Sr. Vice President  
General Counsel & Business Development*

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**Rising Star Nominee**  
**Somath Hasina-Cabrales**  
 Associate Corporate Counsel, ECOS



ecos.com | @ecoscleans

Congratulations to Somath on her nomination for General Counsel Rising Star! Her exceptional talent, tireless dedication, and unwavering support inspire us every day.

company, Scott Becker recently led Willow's acquisition of the UK-based competitor Elvie. The transaction united two pioneering women's health companies and positions the combined company to continue expanding its portfolio of innovative technology, feeding solutions, breast care, and maternal care. Though terms of the deal are not public, Willow's acquisition followed Elvie's administration and extended patent litigation between the two companies. Becker joined Willow in 2022 and built Willow's in-house legal function from the ground up. Prior to joining Willow, Becker served as the lead corporate and securities attorney at VIZIO, where he quarterbacked the company's \$3.9 billion IPO in March 2021. Becker started his career at the Orange County office of Latham & Watkins. In addition to his day job, Becker is an active member of the OCBA and serves on the Board of Directors of The First Tee of Orange County, a non-profit organization focused on character building and life skills lessons for youth through the game of golf.



**Word & Brown Insurance Administrators, Inc., Orange**

*Jeffrey Compangano, Esq., General Counsel & Executive Vice President*

Jeffrey Compangano established the first legal department for The Word & Brown Companies in April of 2000 and continues to be their general counsel. In his leadership role for the multi-faceted insurance organization, he proactively organizes and manages all legal initiatives including intellectual property, transactional, and corporate legal matters. In 2021, he assumed responsibility for and actively manages the HIPAA Privacy & Data Security Department, which is integral to protecting client data. Under Compangano's leadership, specific platforms of the organization have earned HITRUST® Certification four times. HITRUST Certification is the benchmark for data security in health care. Compangano is a key contributor to major organizational dealings, including high-dollar mergers and acquisitions involving publicly traded companies. These include the sale of CONEXIS, the first national benefits administrator offering web-based benefits administration, to WageWorks® in 2014, and the sale of broker online quoting platform Quotit® and HealthCompare®, an online comparison site for consumers, to National General® in 2017.



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# Congratulations 2025 Nominees

The 15th annual General Counsel Awards will be presented at a gala dinner celebration for GC's who have made a significant contribution to the success of their companies.

## Public Companies

**First American Financial Corporation** / Lisa Cornehl  
**LANVIN Group** / Christina Zabat-Fran  
**SmartStop Self Storage REIT, Inc.** / Nicholas Look  
**Tarsus Pharmaceuticals Inc.** / Bryan Wahl  
**The Habit Burger Grill** / Jason Oviatt

## Private Companies

**Allied Universal** / Loretta Cecil  
**Alpha Motor Corporation** / Jada (SoYun) Lee  
**Avid Bioservices Inc.** / Mark Ziebell  
**California Pizza Kitchen, Inc.** / Kendall Jones  
**Caylent Inc.** / Lisa Cohrs  
**First Team Real Estate** / Hila Pooli  
**Hoag Memorial Hospital Presbyterian** / Eric Cheung  
**MBK Real Estate Companies** / Anita Hsu  
**MSI** / Monica Johnson  
**Olen Properties** / Julie Ault-Snyder  
**P&P Imports LLC** / Casey Kempner  
**PACSUN** / Mark Harrington  
**Petalfast Inc.** / Arun Kurichety  
**Prospera Hotels** / Wendy Huang  
**Stratus Financial, LLC** / Don Ho  
**SUPER73, Inc.** / Joseph Geisman  
**Ushio America Inc.** / Ako Shimada  
**Word & Brown General Agency / Word & Brown Insurance Administrators, Inc.** / Jeffrey (Jeff) Compangano, Esq.

## Specialty Counsels

**Clean Energy Fuels Corp.** / Katie Klein  
**Ducommun Incorporated** / Rajiv Tata  
**Pacific Life Insurance Co.** / Joseph Tortorelli  
**Wells Fargo Bank, N.A.** / Kristin Godeke

## Rising Stars

**ECOS** / Somath Hasina-Cabrales  
**loanDepot.com, LLC** / Edgar Martinez  
**Medtronic** / Mark Blake  
**Orange County Department of Education/Orange County Board of Education** / Greg Rolan  
**Pacific Life Insurance Co.** / Alison Ryan  
**Planned Parenthood of Orange and San Bernardino Counties** / Ramona Thomas  
**Sandisk Corporation (NASDAQ: SNDK)** / Jae Park  
**St. George & Carnegie: Nautilus Global Solutions LLC** / Ardelle St. George  
**Terumo Neuro** / Laura Vega  
**Willow Innovations** / Scott Becker

## Lifetime Achievement

**Alteryx Inc.** / Christopher Lal  
**Golden State Foods** / John E. Page, Esq.  
**Hydrafacial LLC** / Paul Bokota  
**Smile Brands Inc.** / Victoria Harvey

## Dinner Gala & Awards Program

November 6, 2025  
 6:30 - 8:30 p.m.  
 Irvine Marriott  
 \*Tickets: \$325 /  
 Table for 10: \$3100



## Reservation Information

Visit [www.ocbj.com/events](http://www.ocbj.com/events) or contact Elyana Torres, Signature Events Manager, at 949.664.5065 or [torres@ocbj.com](mailto:torres@ocbj.com)



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# Meet the Judges:



## **Jason Anderson - Shareholder, *Stradling Yocca Carlson & Rauth***

Jason Anderson represents business owners and managers of closely held businesses in disputes over ownership, control, and direction, often arising from their success. He has successfully litigated these matters in California and Delaware courts, as well as in private arbitration. Known for his aggressive, strategic, and practical approach, Anderson frequently negotiates business separations, commonly referred to as "business divorces", to minimize financial and reputational damage while preserving long-term growth. With over 30 years of experience, Anderson has also represented oil companies, auto manufacturers, tech firms, pharmaceutical and medical device companies, financial institutions, and celebrities. His litigation work covers securities, M&A, trade secrets, defamation, class actions, and real estate disputes.



## **John Bradley - Partner, *Troutman Pepper Locke LLP***

John Bradley's experience and in-depth knowledge enable him to effectively represent public and private companies in a variety of corporate and securities matters. His practice includes representation in mergers and acquisitions on behalf of buyers and sellers; corporate governance and advising senior executives, directors, and public company boards and committees; periodic and other reporting under the Securities Exchange Act of 1934; debt and equity securities offerings venture capital financings; software licensing transactions; and drafting and negotiating a wide variety of business agreements.



## **Steve Hanle - Partner, *Stradling Yocca Carlson & Rauth***

Steve Hanle is a technology litigator who has dedicated his 30-year career to safeguarding the rights of patent holders and defending competitors accused of infringement. In high stakes situations, his strategic and practical approach aggressively protects the years of research and development his clients have poured into technologies behind medical devices, pharmaceuticals, telecommunications, optical advancements, automotive, and mechanical processes. He has an outstanding record of winning cases on summary judgment, thereby avoiding the expense of trial, but also succeeds before juries, judges, and on appeal when necessary. Hanle frequently leverages interim victories to achieve ideal settlements. In addition to patent cases, Hanle represents companies in federal court on trade secrets, unfair competition, trademarks, and complex business and licensing disputes. He also provides pre-litigation advice based on his extensive experience to help companies navigate intellectual property risks.



## **Mark Itri - Partner in Charge, *Baker & Hostetler LLP***

Mark Itri is the Partner-in-Charge of the firm's Orange County office. He concentrates his practice on the preparation and prosecution of patent and trademark applications and litigation matters, focusing on high technology relating to electronics and computer software arts, semiconductors, analog circuitry, microprocessor design, Internet of Things, image processing, pattern and speech recognition, server and network systems, WiFi and Bluetooth, mechanical devices, medical devices, solid state memories, authentication, cyber security, instruments, AI and machine learning, and unmanned and autonomous vehicles. He also negotiates and drafts technology transfer agreements, joint development agreements and licenses and advises his clients on strategic IP planning, patent and trademark portfolio management, freedom to operate and other opinion work and due diligence in connection with technology and trademark acquisitions. A former electrical engineer, Itri worked in the research and development of microprocessor designs and flight control systems in the private aerospace industry, giving him an insider's perspective of the patent and trademark process. He has been named among the Daily Journal's Top 25 Portfolio Managers, one of the leading lawyers in the U.S. for utility and design patent prosecution by The Legal 500, and as one of "The World's Leading Patent Practitioners" by Intellectual Asset Management (IAM) Patent 1000.



## **Michael I. Katz - Managing Partner, *Katz Ruby & Carle LLP***

Michael I. Katz is the managing partner of Katz Ruby Carle LLP, a premier boutique litigation firm known for its sophisticated handling of high-stakes disputes. With over three decades of litigation experience, Katz is recognized as one of the leading trade secret lawyers in California and across the United States. His strategic insight and relentless advocacy have driven numerous landmark victories in both courtrooms and behind-the-scenes resolutions. Before founding Katz Ruby Carle, Katz was a partner in the Intellectual Property and Business Litigation groups at Morrison & Foerster LLP, where he led and won complex, high-profile cases. His litigation practice spans a wide array of industries—including semiconductors, software, medical devices, healthcare, biotech, manufacturing, energy, and agriculture—representing clients ranging from Fortune 100 companies to regional businesses and family enterprises. A formidable force in any legal forum, Katz combines legal excellence with strategic discretion, earning him the respect of clients, colleagues, and adversaries alike.



## **Christian J. Keeney - Principal, *Jackson Lewis P.C.***

Christian J. Keeney is a principal in the Orange County, California, office of Jackson Lewis P.C. Keeney focuses his dedication and commitment to defending employers in all types of employment law matters. His knowledge and experience extends to class actions, discrimination and harassment, and wrongful termination cases, as well as handling investigations and charges from government agencies. Recognizing the unique circumstances of each case, Keeney rejects the "one-size-fits-all" approach, opting instead to tailor his strategies to suit the specific needs and objectives of his clients. Clients have consistently praised Keeney in satisfaction surveys, noting his relentless work ethic, responsiveness, and invaluable insight. Described as a "tireless worker" and an "excellent resource," he has earned his reputation as a top-tier attorney in the field. His high standing is also reflected in his recognition amongst his peers by Super Lawyers.



## **Nikole Kingston - Partner, *O'Melveny & Myers LLP***

Nikole Kingston is an experienced M&A lawyer who represents a broad range of clients, including start-up, emerging growth, and Fortune 500 companies, as well as private equity firms, family owned entities, and individual owners, shareholders, and principals. She counsels companies with operations and interests in a broad range of industries, including health care, technology, personal care products, general consumer products, manufacturing, food, and agriculture, and has represented her clients in a wide range of business transactions, including stock and asset acquisitions, mergers, going-private transactions, minority investments, leveraged buyouts, joint ventures, related financings, spin-offs, and tender offers. Kingston serves as O'Melveny's Firmwide Hiring Partner, responsible for managing recruiting efforts across O'Melveny's 18 offices and is also an adjunct professor at The University of California, Irvine School of Law teaching Mergers & Acquisitions.

**Gloria Lee - Partner, *Rutan & Tucker LLP***

Gloria Lee is the firm's client relations partner and responsible for the strategic growth of business development opportunities for the Firm's attorneys and the implementation of client relationship initiatives for the Firm. Prior to becoming the firm's client relations partner, Lee focused on the financing and development of commercial, residential and resort properties. Her practice included representing lenders, developers, landlords and tenants in all aspects of real estate transactions, including real estate secured financings, acquisitions, dispositions, title review and due diligence analysis. She also has experience with the structuring, development and regulation of residential, commercial, condominium, timeshare, and fractional use planned developments and associations. Lee is active in the community and currently serves on three non-profit boards including the Board of Trustees of Olive Crest and the Council of Korean Americans.

**Patricia Matias - Principal, *Jackson Lewis P.C.***

Patricia Matias is a principal in the Orange County, California, office of Jackson Lewis P.C. and is a co-leader of Jackson Lewis' Hispanic resource group. Matias' broad base of experience gained through practicing employment law for over 15 years makes her a powerful advocate for her clients. She successfully defends employers in high-stakes, single-plaintiff litigation, including discrimination, harassment, retaliation, and wrongful termination matters, as well as in complex Private Attorneys General Act and class action matters. In addition to litigation, Matias provides practical advice regarding personnel policies and decisions, performs workplace investigations, conducts audits, and provides management training. She regularly advises her clients on employment laws, such as those involving wage and hour compliance, leaves of absence, reasonable accommodations, and workplace investigations. Matias helps her clients navigate everchanging legal requirements in a manner that is business-oriented and focused on avoiding litigation and reducing risk while keeping her client's goals in mind.

**Wendy Peterson - General Counsel, *Knobbe Martens***

Wendy Peterson is general counsel to the Firm and handles all of its internal legal matters. Prior to joining Knobbe Martens in 2002, Peterson was general counsel of Wynn Oil Company, a manufacturer of automotive additives and provider of service contracts, and assistant general counsel of Parker-Hannifin Corporation's Seal Group, a manufacturer of rubber and engineered plastic products. From 1993 to 2000, Peterson was assistant general counsel of Wynn's International, Inc., a publicly-held corporation traded on the NYSE. From 1995 to 2000, Peterson also served as corporate secretary to Wynn's International. From 1985 to 1993, Peterson was a corporate and securities law attorney with O'Melveny & Myers. At O'Melveny, Peterson's practice focused on mergers and acquisitions, equity and debt financings, SEC compliance and general corporate law advice. Peterson is active in the community, having served on the boards of directors of SoCal Legal Aid and the American Heart Association Orange County. She currently serves on the board of directors of Human Options, American Cancer Society Orange County, and the Pacific Asian Center for Entrepreneurship at the University of Hawaii.

**Richard Reisman - Publisher, *Orange County Business Journal***

Richard Reisman is publisher of the Orange County Business Journal. Reisman joined the Business Journal in 1990. Since then, the publication's acceptance by the business community has been dramatic. Paid circulation and advertising volume has grown significantly, making it possibly the top Business Journal in the country. Prior to the business journal, Reisman was director of marketing for the Orange County edition of The Los Angeles Times. Earlier in his career, Reisman practiced law in San Francisco and Washington, D.C. While in private practice in Washington, Reisman served as special counsel to the House Ethics Committee. Reisman holds an MBA from UCLA, where he was awarded the R.C. Baker Foundation Fellowship, and a law degree from George Washington University, where he graduated with honors. Reisman is listed in "Who's Who in America" and has served on numerous boards.

**Joel Staples - Advisor, *Cooper McManus***

Joel Staples earned a baseball scholarship to St. Mary's College of California and was drafted by the Florida Marlins in 2008, playing two seasons. After baseball, he practiced law before pivoting to wealth management in 2016. He began at Northwestern Mutual, later joining DJM Financial, where he helped manage over \$1 billion in client assets. In 2022, he brought his practice to Cooper McManus, where he now helps to lead the team and has been instrumental in growing the firm's assets to more than \$1 billion. Staples and his team are go-to advisors for high-net-worth individuals, families, settlement specialists, and plaintiffs' attorneys seeking bespoke financial strategies for themselves or their clients. Whether managing the complexities of a significant liquidity event, structuring estate plans, or optimizing one's portfolio for tax efficiency, they excel at turning complexity into opportunity. Staples resides in Tustin, California with his wife, Miranda, and their two kids, Cooper and Cortland. He is an active member of Compass Bible Church in Aliso Viejo. In his spare time, he enjoys spending time with his family, escaping to the outdoors in Lake Arrowhead, and playing basketball.

**Vince Verde - Equity Shareholder, *Ogletree Deakins***

Vince Verde is the head of the firm's Trial Practice Group. He is a litigator and former prosecutor with extensive jury and non-jury trial experience. He has tried and won jury trials in multiple jurisdictions and represents employers in state and federal courts in single and multi-plaintiff actions. He founded Ogletree's Orange County office and was instrumental in the creation of Ogletree Trial University. His diverse practice includes the representation of regional and national clients in all phases of litigation involving employment, labor matters, commercial disputes, insurance and coverage matters, including D&O, E&O, and health and disability. He has handled claims involving unfair competition, trade secret and non-compete matters, workplace violence, intellectual property rights, class action lawsuits, and claims against insurance agents and brokers. He has extensive experience in all areas of employment law, including wrongful termination, retaliation and 1102.5 claims, discrimination, harassment, wage and hour issues, family and medical leave, disability discrimination and accommodation, and employee privacy. Verde draws on his skills as a trial attorney in order to successfully resolve matters early in litigation or obtain dismissals through summary judgment.

**Peter Villar - Office Managing Partner, *Troutman Pepper***

Peter Villar is a seasoned trial attorney who has successfully tried and defended dozens of high-stakes commercial disputes across the U.S. including several of the largest cases in the Central District of California. Villar represents companies across a spectrum of industries including private equity, technology, aerospace, apparel, manufacturing, energy, finance, life sciences, and real estate, and has litigated claims of securities fraud, breach of fiduciary duty, unfair competition, among others. Villar also has served on the board of directors of the Association of Business Trial Lawyers, Federal Bar Association, and Constitutional Rights Foundation. Additionally, Villar was recognized as a Best Lawyer in America for Securities (2025), and Commercial Litigation (2025).

**Todd R. Wulffson - Orange County Office Managing Partner, *CDF Labor Law LLP***

Todd R. Wulffson is the Orange County Office Managing Partner of CDF Labor Law LLP, a California-based defense labor, employment and immigration law firm with offices throughout the state. Wulffson has focused his practice on counseling and defending businesses in labor and employment matters for over 30 years. In addition to private practice, from 2006-2010, he served as general counsel and SVP of Human Resources to Palace Entertainment. Wulffson is also a frequent speaker, author and resource to employers with workforces in California on employment-related matters ranging from terminations, sexual harassment, pay practices, and classification of employees.