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Ako Shimada's Life Inside The Law Takes New Twist

■ By JOSEPH PIMENTEL

CYPRESS — Over the past year, Ako Shimada's role at Ushio America has expanded beyond the legal department, adding oversight of human resources and marketing.

She's also sharing her career journey with university students in Japan and leading one of Southern California's largest organizations of in-house corporate lawyers.

"I expanded my responsibilities," said Shimada, who received a Business Journal General Counsel Award last year for her work at the Cypress-based company.

Ako Shimada

Expanding Her Roles

In April, Shimada began overseeing human resources and marketing, adding the two departments to her existing responsibilities leading Ushio America's legal and compliance operations.

The new role fits the experience she gained outside of Cypress-based Ushio.

Shimada served as an independent director of Fujitec Co., a Japanese elevator and escalator manufacturer, with her term ending in March when Fujitec went private and delisted from the Tokyo Stock Exchange.

At Fujitec, Shimada led the nomination and compensation committee, focusing on executive succession planning and designing compensation packages.

She said this experience now helps her with her new duties at Ushio, such as evaluating employee performance and handling compensation matters.

Being on the board of a public Japanese company also gave Shimada a better understanding of how Ushio America fits into its global parent company, The Ushio Group. The Tokyo-based company employs 6,000 worldwide and reported $1.2 billion in sales last year.

"It really helps me understand what our responsibilities are as a U.S. subsidiary," she said.

Bridging Two Cultures

Shimada joined Ushio America in 2014 and has spent much of her career working between Japanese and American business cultures.

Last year, she told the Business Journal that Japanese companies usually focus on reaching consensus when making decisions, while U.S. executives often value speed.

It's a challenge she continues to navigate.

"It never gets easy," Shimada said. "But I understand better. I have much more appreciation of communication challenges and opportunities because I can see both sides of the Pacific."

She said that knowing both perspectives helps her bridge communication between Japanese expatriates and local employees.

"I know what works and what doesn't," she said.

Giving Back

Shimada is also taking on leadership roles outside of Ushio.

On Oct. 1, she will become president of the Southern California chapter of the Association of Corporate Counsel, which has more than 1,600 members.

"I think it will be good for people to see that somebody like me is heading the organization," Shimada said. "I was a foreign student. I grew up in Japan and came here as a college student, a freshman."

She is also sharing her experiences with younger people through the U.S.-Japan Council's Japanese American Storytelling Program.

So far, Shimada has given presentations to students at Chuo University and Seijo University in Japan about moving to the U.S., becoming a lawyer, and building a career that spans countries.

She plans another university session this fall.

"I'm always trying to learn new things and expand my horizons," she said. ■

Scott Becker: Rising Star at Willow Moves up to Collectors

■ By NANCY LUNA

SANTA ANA — Over his career, Scott Becker says opportunities for top in-house legal jobs don't come along very often in Orange County.

"It's a competitive market," Becker told the Business Journal. "There are a lot of qualified attorneys and not that many companies looking to hire."

So, it took him by surprise when a recruiter he had known for several years called about a deputy general counsel position at Santa Ana-based Collectors Holdings Inc., known for authenticating and grading sports cards, Pokémon cards, memorabilia, coins and other collectibles.

Collectors began grading coins in 1986. In 2021, an investor group led by entrepreneur and collector Nat Turner took the company private in an $853 million deal. Since then, Collectors has invested heavily in technology, facilities and international expansion.

Scott Becker, deputy general counsel, Collectors Holdings

An Opportunity Worth Pursuing

Becker, who won a Business Journal General Counsel Award last year in the Rising Star category, wasn't looking to leave Willow Innovations, the Silicon Valley-based wearable breast pump maker where he was serving as general counsel and corporate secretary.

But after meeting with Collectors General Counsel Roxana Jamshidi and others at the company, he knew the opportunity was worth pursuing.

"Everyone I talked to just made me more and more excited about the company, the opportunity, and his role specifically," said Becker, who started at Collectors as deputy general counsel on Sept. 15.

A week later, his instincts proved correct.

"After my first week at Collectors, what stands out most is the people — their expertise, their energy and how much they care about the collectors we work for," he said. "I'm thrilled to be a part of this team and looking forward to some really exciting things ahead for Collectors."

With Collectors 'growing like crazy,' Becker said he'll help support the company as it scales.

He joins a legal team of about seven as its No. 2 executive, reporting to Jamshidi, who has a litigation background.

Becker said he'll focus on "the corporate side of the house," drawing on his experience leading financing and M&A transactions at Willow and quarterbacking Irvine-based Vizio's 2021 initial public offering. He'll also help mentor and expand the legal department.

"I think just given the growth in the business," he said, "it's understood that the legal team is going to have to grow pretty significantly to keep pace. Collecting is really having a moment."

Wrapping Up at Willow

Becker's move comes about a year after the Business Journal honored him for his work at Willow, where he helped engineer the acquisition of assets from U.K.-based rival Elvie.

The complicated transaction grew out of a patent infringement dispute and expanded Willow's product portfolio and international reach.

"We've got the business fully integrated now, which is great," Becker said, adding that Willow is looking to expand its product pipeline over the next six to nine months.

Before he left for Collectors, he helped Willow recently file a complaint with the U.S. International Trade Commission (ITC) against companies in the U.S. and abroad who are allegedly infringing patents covering its wearable breast pump technology.

"Willow invented the wearable category and invested in the foundational IP in the space," he said.

Becker isn't planning to leave his work at Willow entirely behind. He will consult for the company, primarily providing strategic advice related to the ITC cases and helping preserve institutional knowledge as the company transitions to new leadership.

At the same time, he's adjusting to another change: commuting to an office.

Becker has worked remotely since the pandemic from his home in Costa Mesa. Driving to Collectors' Santa Ana headquarters will be his first regular office commute in several years.

He knows the next few months will be busy.

"I'm not going to sleep very much," he said. ■

Paul Bokota isn't Embarrassed to Ask Questions

■ By EMILY SANTIAGO-MOLINA

LONG BEACH — **Paul Bokota**, general counsel at **Hydrafacial LLC**, has added even more responsibilities to his plate since winning the Lifetime Achievement Award at the Business Journal's **General Counsel Awards** in 2025.

Hydrafacial, which develops skincare therapy and treatments, is the flagship brand and main revenue driver of Long Beach-based **SkinHealth Systems Inc.**, previously known as **The Beauty Health Company**. "Hydrafacialists" train and deliver the different treatments in medical clinics and spas that partner with **SkinHealth Systems**.

Bokota said Hyrdafacial is currently preparing to bring a new product to market in the first half of 2027. He declined to share more details.

In the meantime, he's also overseen the launch of several consumables or boosters in the past year that help extend existing Hydrafacial treatments for wrinkles or acne.

Bokota pointed to the amount of work it

Paul Bokota
General Counsel,
Chief Human Resources Officer
Hydrafacial/SkinHealth Systems Inc.

takes to make, distribute and ship any medical aesthetic product in the U.S. and overseas, even when it's only boosters.

"Every time you launch something, even if it's not a huge product, if you're launching it across multiple jurisdictions, then there are always a lot of regulatory marketing and other considerations that we're involved in," he said.

Since last November, Bokota has also taken on the additional roles of chief human resources officer (CHRO) and head of the regulatory team. The previous CHRO left in February, and Chief Executive **Pedro Malha** asked Bokota to run the department.

"I have three hats that I'm wearing now," he told the Business Journal. "I think there was an efficiency or consistency idea that if we could put that under legal, that would be helpful."

Rebranded SkinHealth Systems

Bokota previously won the Business Journal's General Counsel Award in the private company segment in 2018 while working at **Spectrum Brands Inc.** as division general counsel and division vice president.

Two years later, when the pandemic hit, Spectrum went through a companywide restructuring. Bokota's role was eliminated. While looking for a new job, Bokota was recommended for an open position at Hydrafacial.

He joined in late 2020 as general counsel and senior vice president. His first task was to take the medical aesthetics firm public — something he had never done before.

"I'm too old to be embarrassed by asking questions," he said. "I'm used to going into new jurisdictions and being uncomfortable with not being an expert."

After several months of learning about initial public offerings and corporate governance while building the company's legal team, Hydrafacial went public as The Beauty Health Company through a special purpose acquisition company (SPAC) in May 2021. The parent organization rebranded as SkinHealth Systems last April.

Following the IPO, Bokota spent the second half of the year overseeing the acquisition of four international distributors of Hydrafacial products as well as a microneedling concept called SkinStylus.

He now leads a legal team of six and has kept busy protecting Hydrafacial's intellectual property (IP) as well as helping launch new products in accordance with federal regulations.

SkinHealth Systems, which has a market cap of around $88 million, reported 2025 sales of $300.8 million and counts more than 36,000 medical aesthetic devices worldwide (Nasdaq: SKIN). ■

Bryan Wahl, Navigates a 'Whirlwind Summer'

■ By KEVIN COSTELLOE

IRVINE — Lawyer, doctor and business leader **Bryan Wahl** says deep down he's still a physician and "caring for patients remains deeply important to me."

Wahl won a Business Journal General Counsel Award in the public company category in November 2025 for his work at Irvine-based biopharmaceutical firm **Tarsus Pharmaceuticals**, known for its eyelid disease treatment drug Xdemvy (Nasdaq: TARS).

"I'm glad that I can contribute across all those areas, law, medicine and business," he told the Business Journal as he looked back at the 10 months since the award.

He still spends some weekends working as a physician at **Kaiser Permanente** hospitals in Irvine and Baldwin Park. He is board-certified in internal medicine.

"I think at my core I am a physician and caring for patients remains deeply important to me," he said. He says continuing to practice medicine "really keeps me grounded in the work we do here at Tarsus."

Bryan Wahl
General Counsel
Tarsus Pharmaceuticals

Challenging and Rewarding

Wahl is also full-time general counsel for Tarsus, one of Orange County's standout biopharmaceutical companies.

He calls the work both challenging and rewarding.

Wahl has helped Tarsus launch its blockbuster medication Xdemvy to combat microscopic bugs in the eyelids called mites, an ailment that affects an estimated 25 million Americans.

Tarsus said on Sept. 4 it had completed its acquisition of Cambridge, Massachusetts-based **Alkeus Pharmaceuticals Inc.**, which makes a treatment for a rare retinal disease.

In July, Tarsus closed its acquisition of **iRenix Medical Inc.**, adding an eye antiseptic used before retinal injections to its portfolio.

"We identify diseases that have been overlooked for years," said Wahl, adding that it was a "whirlwind summer" at the company.

Shares in Tarsus were trading at $74.56 apiece as of Sept. 23, up 34% over the last year. The company has a market cap of about $3.5 billion.

"I think it's great that investors are recognizing our phenomenal growth," says Wahl, a resident of Newport Beach. "It's super challenging but I'm really pleased with our progress."

He helped the company through its initial public offering six years ago.

Orange County to Hawaii and Back

Wahl's journey started in Orange County, where he was born some 47 years ago. He then grew up in Hawaii, where, in 1999, he earned his Doctor of Medicine from the **University of Hawaii** John A. Burns School of Medicine.

He was 21 years old at the time.

Wahl became a resident in internal medicine at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center for three years.

He then decided to earn a law degree "on a whim" and graduated in 2005 with a Juris Doctorate from the **University of California, Berkeley** School of Law.

By age 33, he had become a partner at Irvine-based law firm **Knobbe Martens LLP**, advising biotech and medical device companies on IP strategy, financing and transactions worth billions of dollars. He practiced at the nationally ranked intellectual property firm for 15 years. ■

Inside Mark Blake's High-Stakes Litigation Strategy

■ By YUIKA YOSHIDA

IRVINE — For **Mark Blake**, it has been business as usual since winning the Business Journal's General Counsel Awards in the specialty counsel category last year.

As head of IP litigation at **Medtronic**, one of the world's largest medical device makers, Blake is responsible for defending the company's innovations, from patent disputes to licensing agreements.

"The company's been very busy in trying to innovate and continue to tackle some of the industry's toughest problems," Blake told the Business Journal.

Blake, whose legal career spans **Edwards Lifesciences Corp.** and **Masimo**, was recognized for his success in high-stakes litigation, including the successful reversal last July of a $125 million judgment awarded to Colorado-based competitor **Colibri Heart Valve LLC**. Blake and his team not only overturned the patent infringement decision but also convinced the Federal Circuit to order a finding of non-infringement, effectively ending the case.

Mark Blake
Head of IP Litigation
Medtronic

Medtronic, based in Minnesota, has its neuroscience business in Irvine and its cardiovascular unit in Santa Ana. The neuroscience unit, which generates more than $10 billion in annual revenue, was previously led by **Brett Wall** before he stepped down in June to pursue his own entrepreneurial ventures.

Wall received the Business Journal's **Innovator of the Year Award** last year and will return Oct. 7 as the keynote speaker at this year's event at the **Irvine Marriott**.

Robust Portfolio

Medtronic's portfolio includes more than 43,000 active patents.

While there's a dedicated team for each of Medtronic's 20 business units that manages those patents, colleagues call on Blake when there's any sort of dispute such as copycats.

Getting a medical device to market is a lengthy process, often taking three to five years to secure a patent before the product must then clear regulatory approval.

"It takes an enormous amount of time and investment to get a device approved," Blake told the Business Journal last year. "Intellectual property is extremely important to help protect the investment you have in coming to market."

Medtronic last month announced it received FDA clearance within its medical surgical portfolio for the LigaSure RAS Maryland to be used in tandem with the company's Hugo robotic-assisted surgery system.

The instrument seals and cuts vessels, thick tissue bundles and lymph channels during minimally invasive robotic procedures.

Giving Back

Blake noted that he's been the "beneficiary of fantastic mentors" who have inspired him to pay it forward.

While an in-house litigator at Edwards, he led a first-year summer law program focused on diversity in the legal community.

"We felt that if we could give an opportunity to those who might most need it, it might help springboard their careers," Blake said. "Particularly before their second year when most of them get their internships."

Despite his busy schedule at Medtronic, Blake also makes time to teach a Bible study class for high school students once or twice a week during the school year.

"That's something that's definitely challenging for my schedule," he said, "but it's important and something I enjoy doing." ■

Katz Ruby & Carle

Why In House Counsel Should Hire Boutique Litigation Firms!

Authors: Michael Katz and Nathan Carle

In-house counsel often prefer to go with a brand name firm that cannot be second guessed. As BigLaw massifies and bifurcates much of the legal market into the very expensive and the "if you have to ask" stratospheres, one should begin to question the wisdom of that maxim. The cost associated with what was once deemed a prudent decision has now escalated to the point of, well let's be honest, imprudence. One can quickly burn through a sizable legal budget at today's Big Firm rates and achieve very little, other than forcing one's adversary to do the same. This zero-sum game, moreover, generates its own rationale for spending ever more money. To what end?

It is time to reconsider the boutique litigation firm as a service provider on both small and significant matters. In prior eras, boutique firms were slotted to handle significant cases. We are currently experiencing a renaissance of that era. The fact that AI has rapidly presented a useable tool for litigators tasked with sorting through voluminous data has only increased the ability of smaller firms to go toe to toe with much larger ones on a given case. Size may still matter for certain matters, but in far fewer matters than it once did.

Boutique firms offer tangible financial advantages, beginning with lower rates, pricing flexibility, greater use of success fees and flat fees, and other alternative billing structures. Moreover, boutique firms are often more adept at developing viable legal strategies based on realistic or even constrained budgets. Without long-term lease arrangements at tony addresses, bedecked with imported designer furniture and bespoke art collections, the boutique firm is a lean machine. When expenses are fewer, your matter can matter more.

Boutique litigation firms are versatile. They can offer extreme efficiency, or its opposite, intense dedication to a particular matter or client. The menu of service flexibility, including the manner in which your case is staffed, is not freighted by the weight of bureaucratic baggage or institutional considerations, including the inefficient practice of giving the youngest lawyers the lion share of work, with multiple layers of lawyer oversight. Yet many boutiques feature legal talent trained at the brand name firms and from premier law schools.

With a boutique litigation firm, you can be better assured that business conflicts are not quietly weighing on how your matter is handled.

Small firms, like the one in which the authors work, do not impose excessive billable hour or business origination requirements. Removing these twin pillars of the business of law practice allows lawyers to invest more in the practice of law rather than the business of law. A big firm lawyer who crosses over to a boutique platform is someone who is comfortable handling matters soup to nuts. They are willing to devote their time and thought to your matter, without having to worry so much about their metrics. And that attracts the kind of lawyer who cares more for practicing in that way.

All of these considerations are overshadowed, in the authors' view, by one fundamental advantage of a boutique litigation firm: the lawyers tend to be more innovative and fearless.

Michael Katz
After starting practice at Simpson Thacher & Bartlett in New York, Michael Katz became a partner at Morrison & Foerster, before starting his own firm. With over thirty years of experience, he is the Managing Partner of Katz Ruby & Carle, a boutique litigation firm whose lawyers share stellar credentials and a love of practicing law. The Firm staffs its cases with small teams of subject matter experts who remain on a matter from beginning to end, developing the path to victory from the moment the case enters the door. Katz's practice focuses on complex business and intellectual property disputes, with a specialty in trade secret litigation. The Firm currently represents InnoPeak, Inc. in a high profile trade secret matter brought by Apple, Inc. involving health sensing technology in the Apple Watch.

Nathan Carle
Nathan Carle is a founding partner at Katz Ruby & Carle. After starting practice at Sullivan & Cromwell and Linklaters in New York, Carle went west as a young man. Carle is a seasoned business litigator whose expertise spans securities litigation, trust disputes, battles for control of companies, complex fraud, and trade secret disputes. Carle recently secured an eight-figure settlement for a business who sued a credit card provider and its merchant bank for unfair business practices.

Knobbe Martens

The Evolving Role of Artificial Intelligence In Creative Works

By: Jeremiah Helm, Knobbe Martens

What is AI

Artificial intelligence (AI) is a broad term used to describe huge swaths of activity. AI is not a new concept, and forms of AI have been used in science and technology for many years. More recently, however, generative AI has come to the forefront of discussions related to both cultural developments and innovation. Generative AI "trains" models to learn patterns underlying a set of data. After training, the generative AI model can use patterns identified in the underlying data set to generate new text, images, or videos in response to a user's prompt.

AI and Creative Works

Much of the popular press surrounding AI involves its use in creative works. For example, AI assisted filmmaking is increasingly common. Darren Aronofsky, who directed the Oscar-nominated movie *Black Swan*, founded a company named Primordial Soup that uses AI to produce films. One project, supported by Google's DeepMind AI division, was a series of episodes about United States history entitled *"On This Day…1776."* These are AI-generated films but, according to Primordial Soup, the individuals depicted are voiced by SAG-AFTRA union actors.

Danny Boyle, who won an Academy Award for his film *Slumdog Millionaire*, recently released *Ink*, a biographical film based on Rupert Murdoch's British tabloid newspaper, *The Sun*. According to Boyle, *Ink* uses about thirty seconds of AI-generated content. Boyle framed the use of AI as a budget issue related to virtual effects. He noted that actors were hired and paid to perform in roles, but AI was used to digitally replace portions of the actor's appearance.

A more extreme use of AI in creative works is the "AI actress" styled Tilly Norwood, a photorealistic character produced, using generative AI, by Xicoia. Xicoia is an "AI Talent Studio" that is part of Particle6 Group, an "AI Production Studio." AI-generated videos present Norwood in scenes similar to those encountered by humans, for example on the red carpet. In July 2026, Particle6 announced that *Misaligned*, a film featuring Norwood, was in development. The Norwood character was interviewed by Piers Morgan as part of the promotion of *Misaligned*.

Such uses of generative AI are controversial. Among other things, the use of AI in films raises concerns that a producer can put human-appearing figures into morally or ethically compromised situations without any human actor to push back. AI-based productions have also been criticized as "soulless" or lacking humanity. And industry use of AI was an important issue in the 2023 Writers Guild of America strike. Nevertheless, huge volumes of visual, audio, and written works are created daily by generative AI users.

The Copyright Office's AI Initiative

The United State Copyright Office is the government entity in charge of registering creative works. Although copyright protection of content made by generative AI is a relatively new issue, the protection of creative works by non-humans is not.

Historically, the Copyright Office has required human involvement in the creative aspect of a work for it to be entitled to protection. One dispute pre-dating generative AI involved "selfie" pictures taken by monkeys using cameras set up by the wildlife photographer David J. Slater. Slater argued he had a copyright to the photos because he created the situation that allowed the monkeys to take the pictures. The Copyright Office, however, declined to register works produced by nature, animals, or plants, such as photographs taken by a monkey, because the Copyright Act protects "original works of authorship" and "authorship" requires a work created by a human being. PETA, the animal rights group, filed a lawsuit against Slater on behalf of one of the monkeys, and argued the monkey exercised creativity and thus deserved a copyright. The court ruled against PETA, holding that animals cannot hold a copyright.

Today the Copyright Office faces analogous questions with respect to works created by generative AI. In 2022, the Copyright Office refused to register a work that was asserted to be created without human involvement. But a year later, the Office registered a comic book that included AI-generated material. In January 2025, the Copyright Office issued a report addressing copyright issues in the context of creative works that included AI-generated content. The report discussed three kinds of potential human contribution to AI generated works.

First, the report discussed instances where the user merely prompts the AI system to produce some output, and concluded that such instructions alone do not provide sufficient human involvement or control to justify authorship. The Office explained that the random choices that a generative AI makes when applying a pattern of data to the ultimate output meant that entering the same prompt would not create the same image. This underscores the lack of control that the human user has in the process. A user's iteration on the prompt to refine the output, sometimes called "prompt engineering," did not eliminate the problem of a lack of control and did not change the Office's view on copyrightability. The Office acknowledged, however, that further technological developments might change its analysis if they provided a user with sufficient creative control over the output.

Second, the Office discussed expressive inputs, where a user uploads their own creative work (such as a drawing) and uses the generative AI to make adjustments. The Office concluded that if the creative aspects of the human's own work are perceptible in the AI generated output, then it could be covered by copyright. The Copyright Office indicated that protectable material would include elements such as selection, coordination, and arrangement of the human-authored and AI-generated material.

Finally, the Office addressed modifying or arranging AI-generated content. This situation involves AI-generated content that a user then edits to create the final output. For example, a film that includes AI-generated special effects or background images will be copyrightable, even if the AI effects or art standing on their own are not. The Office explained, however, that any analysis would have to be done on a case-by-case basis applying existing standards for the originality needed to convey authorship.

Conclusion

Protection for creative works in the age of generative AI is an evolving question. The need for human input and control in both creative works and innovation, including patented inventions, is constantly being challenged and reevaluated on practical, philosophical, and ethical grounds. Moving forward, changes in technology are likely to continuously reframe the debate surrounding the role that AI has in our modern creative society.

Jeremiah S. Helm is a partner in the Orange County office of Knobbe Martens, where he co-chairs the appellate practice group. Jeremiah has represented clients in a variety of technological fields, with an emphasis on patent litigation and appellate practice.

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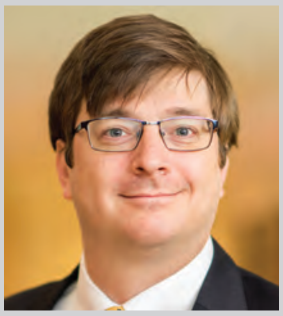

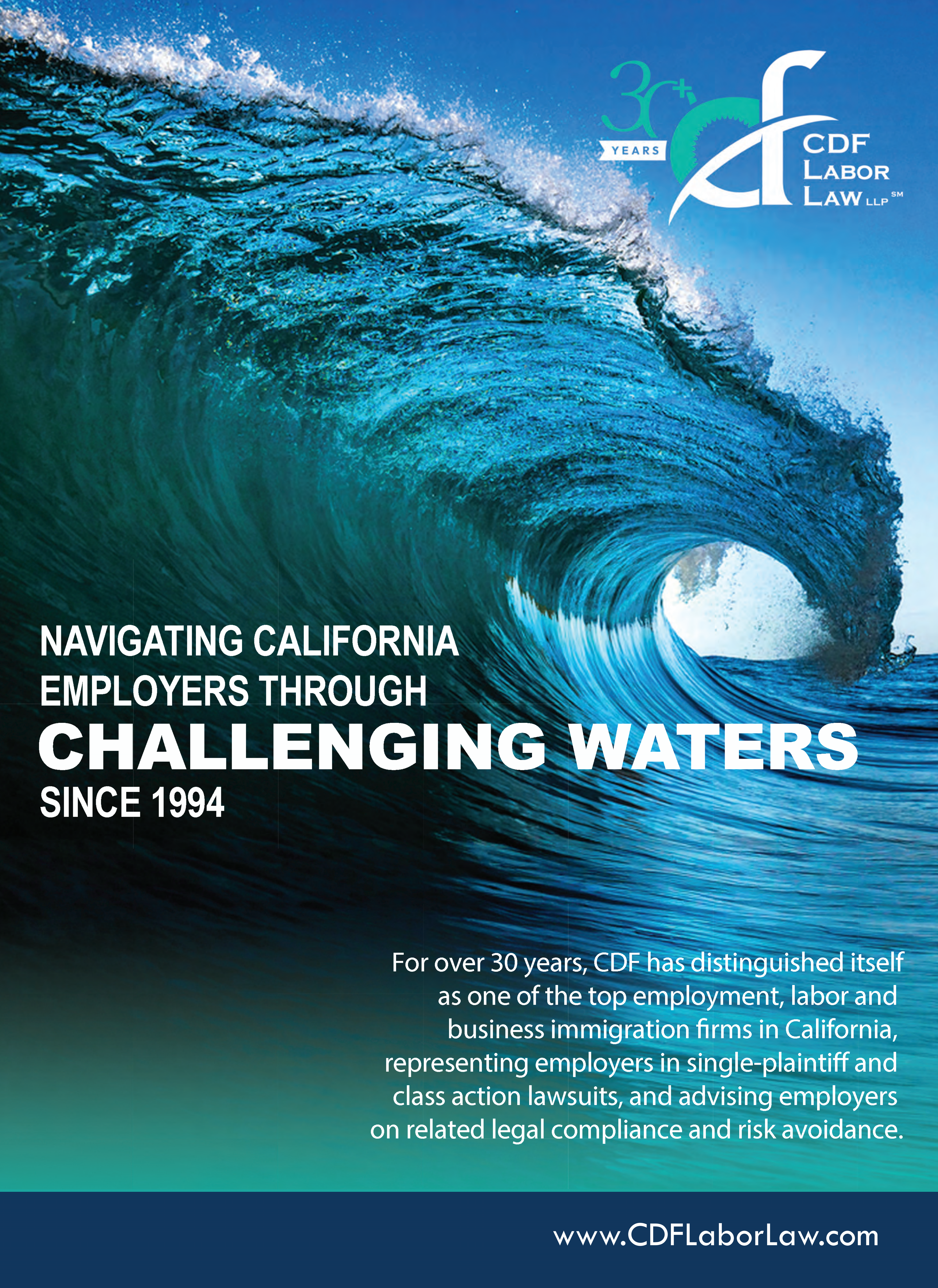

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Understanding the California DELETE Act: Key Insights and Implications

Written By: Shelby Dolen and Marlaina Zollinger Pinto

California continues to be at the forefront of consumer data privacy regulation. For businesses that collect and sell consumer data, the DELETE Act and its corresponding Delete Request and Opt-out Platform (DROP) regulations expand compliance obligations under the existing data broker framework. This article provides an overview of the law, highlights practical implications, and offers guidance for building a defensible compliance program.

Overview of the DELETE Act and DROP
Signed into law in October 2023, the DELETE Act builds on the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) framework by creating a centralized deletion mechanism administered by the California Privacy Protection Agency (CalPrivacy). The law requires every entity that meets the definition of a "data broker" to register with CalPrivacy and participate in the newly launched DROP. Under the DELETE Act, a company is a "data broker" when it knowingly collects and sells personal information of California consumers with whom it lacks a direct relationship and meets the CCPA's definition of a "business."

DROP launched in 2026, allowing registered California residents to direct all registered data brokers to delete their personal information through a single request submitted on the platform. Each registered data broker must access DROP at least once every 45 days, process all applicable deletion requests, and direct any service providers or contractors that received the covered data to delete it.

In addition to fines for not registering with the state, a data broker that fails to comply with a DROP deletion request may face an administrative fine of $200 per request for each day the information remains undeleted. As of August 25, 2026, CalPrivacy has reported that more than 500,000 Californians have registered for DROP, bringing a data broker's potential penalties for non-compliance to over $100,000,000 per day, with actual exposure depending on how many registrants' data the broker holds.

After honoring a request, a data broker generally may not sell or share newly collected personal information about that consumer unless the consumer affirmatively consents to opt back in. The DELETE Act layers additional transparency and accountability requirements on top of existing CCPA obligations. Registered data brokers face enhanced disclosure and recordkeeping duties, including maintaining verifiable records of how deletion requests were processed and the timeframes for completion. Looking ahead, the law introduces independent audit requirements beginning in 2028, requiring data brokers to undergo third-party reviews of their deletion and opt-out practices.

Strategic Implications for Businesses
The DELETE Act's operational requirements require affected businesses to move well beyond a check-the-box registration exercise. Several areas merit immediate attention.

Determining data broker status. Companies should evaluate whether their data practices bring them within the statutory definition of a data broker. Under the DELETE Act, personal information carries the same broad definition established under the CCPA. Importantly, publicly available information remains outside the scope of the data broker-specific law, which may be a significant exclusion for certain businesses. Businesses should not rely on the exemptions under the CCPA, however, as the DELETE Act has its own exceptions, including entities covered by the Fair Credit Reporting Act or the Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act. Businesses engaged in data aggregation, lead generation, people-search services, advertising-data licensing, or similar activities should undertake this assessment promptly.

Multi-entity registration. Critically, the data broker analysis must be performed entity by entity, not at the enterprise or brand level. A review of the California Data Broker Registry reveals that relatively few corporate groups have registered multiple legal entities. Some companies appear to register one entity while listing multiple brands, DBAs, or websites under that single registration, an approach that may or may not reflect the underlying operational and legal structure.

This divergence likely reflects two distinct strategies playing out across the industry. Some companies may be centralizing all data broker activity within a single legal entity so that affiliate entities do not independently trigger registration obligations. Others may be registering with only one entity despite potential data broker activity across affiliates.

For corporate groups navigating this question, the threshold inquiry is which legal entities, independently, collect and sell personal information of California consumers with whom they have no direct relationship. If the answer is more than one, a conservative posture may require multiple registrations. Where data broker activities are genuinely centralized within a single legal entity, a single registration may be supportable. But where affiliates independently qualify, failure to register each entity exposes the broader corporate group to penalties and enforcement scrutiny.

Registration information. Data brokers must submit certain information when registering with DROP, including describing the products and services covered by the law, the types of personal information collected and sold, and the proportion of data collected and sold that is subject to the law compared to its total data collection and sales. These disclosures require a close comparison to any public disclosures the data broker has made, including public privacy notices.

Preserve defensible records. Given the independent audit requirements starting in 2028, data brokers should establish detailed recordkeeping practices now. Demonstrating compliance during an audit will require the data broker to maintain verifiable logs showing when it received deletion requests, when it completed processing those requests, and when it passed those requests to applicable service providers or contractors. Data brokers have a narrow but meaningful window to build processes that will withstand external scrutiny.

Vendor and contractual obligations. Data brokers relying on third-party data suppliers or downstream vendors should assess whether their existing contracts adequately address DELETE Act compliance. Contracts that predate the law may lack provisions requiring counterparties to honor deletion requests, propagate those requests downstream, or maintain the recordkeeping necessary to demonstrate compliance. Renegotiating or supplementing these agreements now reduces exposure as the deletion framework becomes fully operational.

Conclusion
The California DELETE Act meaningfully expands consumer privacy rights and imposes substantial new obligations and penalties on data brokers operating in California. The law is not a static compliance exercise, and organizations should resist treating it as one. Organizations that have not yet assessed their data broker status, mapped their data flows, and established operational processes for DROP should treat these steps as urgent priorities to reduce regulatory risk and position themselves for the independent audits beginning in 2028.

Shelby Dolen, Associate:
Shelby develops and implements comprehensive privacy programs that are tailored to the specific needs of each client, helping them to remain compliant as privacy laws continue to evolve at the state, federal, and international levels. She is well versed in all U.S. state privacy laws, laws governing social media and children's data, AI laws and regulations, and international data privacy laws, including the GDPR.

Marlaina Zollinger Pinto, Associate:
Marlaina advises clients on a broad range of privacy and data protection matters, drawing on experience in marketing technology. She provides strategic counsel on consumer data use and regulatory obligations under both U.S. state privacy laws and international data privacy laws, such as the GDPR. Marlaina develops cross-jurisdictional data privacy compliance strategies, helping clients navigate complex data privacy issues in an environment where laws are rapidly evolving. Her practice includes drafting privacy policies, terms of use, and data processing agreements, and preparing privacy impact assessments for emerging technologies such as AI.

JacksonLewis

California Employers Should Revisit Repayment and "Stay-or-Pay" Arrangements in Light of AB 692

By: Christian J. Keeney and Patricia Ann Matias

California's took effect on January 1, 2026, restricting many employment-related repayment and 'stay-or-pay' provisions in contracts entered into on or after that date. It may affect offer letters, bonuses, tuition programs, relocation arrangements, immigration-cost provisions, and other agreements imposing a financial consequence when work ends. Employers should also monitor a pending measure that could materially change AB 692's timing and exceptions.

AB 692 prohibits contract terms triggered by the end of work with a particular employer that require a worker to pay a debt; allow collection to begin or resume, or forbearance to end, on a debt; or impose a penalty, fee, or cost. 'Debt' includes money, personal property, or its equivalent allegedly owed for employment-related costs, education-related costs, or consumer financial products or services, whether certain, contingent, or voluntarily incurred. Covered penalties may include replacement-hire, retraining, replacement, and quit fees; immigration- or visa-related reimbursements; liquidated damages; lost goodwill; and lost profits.

AB 692 contains exceptions for government loan-repayment or forgiveness programs, approved apprenticeships, qualifying tuition arrangements for transferable credentials, qualifying discretionary or unearned monetary payments made at the outset of employment, and residential-property contracts.

A qualifying tuition agreement must be separate from the employment contract, cannot make the credential a condition of employment, must disclose and limit the amount, must prorate repayment without acceleration, and generally cannot require repayment after termination except for misconduct.

A qualifying bonus agreement requires the following:

(a) the terms of repayment are separate from the employment contract;

(b) the employee is notified of their right to consult an attorney about the agreement and provided not less than five business days to do so;

(c) repayment is prorated based on the remaining term of any retention period which must not be more than two years, without interest accrual;

(d) the worker may defer receipt of the payment to the end of the retention period without repayment obligations; and

(e) separation is either at the employee's sole discretion or due to employee misconduct.

AB 1697 Could Change the Compliance Date and Exceptions

As of September 22, 2026, has passed the Legislature and is pending before the Governor. As an urgency measure, it would take effect immediately if signed. It would move AB 692's operative contract date to January 1, 2027, make the provisions inoperative during 2026, prevent liability from accruing for conduct between January 1, 2026, and AB 1697's effective date, and moot pending claims based on alleged violations during that period.

AB 1697 would also add additional exceptions to the law, including the following:

· Retention bonuses if certain requirements are met

· Repayment obligation arising from voluntary separation related to advanced paid time off

· Sign-on or retention bonuses within some regulated professions if certain requirements are met

Governor Newsom has until September 30, 2026, to sign or veto this amendment to the law.

New York and Other States Are Addressing Similar Agreements

New York's becomes effective December 19, 2026. It covers public and private employers and defines an 'employment promissory note' as an agreement requiring an employee to pay the employer, or its agent or assignee, if employment ends before a stated period expires. An employer may not require an employee or applicant to sign such a note as a condition of employment. A prohibited term is unconscionable, against public policy, unenforceable, and void, although the rest of a larger agreement may survive.

New York permits reimbursement for tuition, fees, and required educational materials for a transferable credential if the agreement is separate from employment, the credential is not required, the disclosed amount does not exceed the employer's cost, repayment is prorated without acceleration, and repayment is not required after termination except for misconduct. A transferable credential may include a widely recognized degree, diploma, license, certificate, skill credential, or course completion. Employer-specific instruction and legally mandated safety or compliance training do not qualify. The law also permits certain agreements concerning voluntarily sold or leased property; repayment of bonuses, relocation assistance, or other non-performance-based incentives, subject to termination and misrepresentation limits; educational sabbaticals; and collectively bargained programs.

An employee who successfully defends a suit to enforce a prohibited note may recover attorney's fees. An aggrieved employee or applicant may complain to the New York Commissioner of Labor, who may assess $1,000 to $5,000 per violation after considering employer size, good faith, gravity, and prior violations. Each affected person is a separate violation.

The trend extends beyond California and New York. This year, Washington State passed banning nearly all employment noncompete agreements, which takes effect June 30, 2027. The bill, like California, includes an express exception directed at repayment agreements. A written agreement to repay the employer's out-of-pocket education expenses is excluded from the ban if it meets the following requirements:

1. Expires within 18 months after the employee's start date;
2. Limits repayment to the prorated portion of the remaining 18-month period; and
3. Releases the employee from repayment if the separation is based on good cause under the law.

Employer Takeaway

Employers with multistate workforces should tailor repayment agreements by jurisdiction rather than rely on a single template. Reviews should address the benefit type, triggering event, repayment period, proration, interest, termination circumstances, and required disclosures. California employers should continue evaluating their forms under AB 692 while monitoring AB 1697. New York and Washington employers should update their agreements to comply with their states' new requirements, and employers elsewhere should watch for similar developments as this trend continues nationwide.

For more information, visit www.jacksonlewis.com

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Gift Card Rule Change in California Raises Compliance Stakes

By: Shawn Collins (Partner) and Michael Mosher (Associate)

Since January 1, 2008, California law has required retailers to redeem remaining gift card balances of less than $10 for cash when a consumer requests it. This threshold changed earlier this year.

Effective April 1, 2026, gift cards with a remaining balance of less than $15 must be redeemable for cash in California. This change, enacted through California Senate Bill 22, marks the first adjustment to the cash-out requirement since the current $10 threshold was established back in 2008. Companies that sell goods or services in California should be aware of this change. Gift cards are widely used across various industries and channels. According to Bankrate, Americans currently hold up to $27 billion in unused gift card balances. Therefore, even this seemingly small adjustment in the law can lead to significant compliance, litigation, and financial implications if businesses do not update their policies and systems in advance.

A Small Dollar Change With Significant Business Impact
A $5 increase in the cash-out threshold may seem minor. However, for companies with large customer bases or high gift card volumes, the overall impact can be substantial. Small remaining balances often encourage customers to return and spend more than the card's value. If consumers redeem these balances for cash instead, this dynamic changes.

Moreover, for large companies, even a refund of $1 or $2 across millions of transactions can have significant financial implications. Noncompliance with gift card laws also exposes companies to significant legal risks.

A Brief Look at the Statute
The cash-out requirement appears in California Civil Code section 1749.5, which governs gift certificates and gift cards sold for use in California. As amended by SB 22 and operative on April 1, 2026, some of the important provisions of the statute include:

- Gift certificates generally may not include expiration dates or service fees, subject to limited statutory exceptions.
- Gift certificates with a remaining value of less than $15 must be redeemable for cash upon the holder's request, an increase from the prior $10 threshold.
- The law applies broadly to both physical and electronic gift cards.
- "Cash" is defined expansively and may include currency, checks, or electronic funds transfers, if accepted by both parties.

The statute also contains several narrow exceptions, including for certain promotional or loyalty gift certificates, donated or discounted certificates issued for fundraising purposes, perishable food certificates, and limited circumstances in which dormancy fees may be assessed. Whether a particular program qualifies for an exception often turns on specific facts, including how the card is issued, whether consideration is paid, and how required disclosures are presented.

Enforcement Efforts and Private Causes of Action
California district attorneys have been actively enforcing the gift card redemption law for several years, often collaborating across counties during these enforcement actions. A recent example highlights this coordinated effort.

In October 2025, Chipotle Mexican Grill agreed to pay $246,000 in civil penalties, restitution, and costs to settle allegations that it failed to provide required cash refunds for gift card balances under the statutory threshold. This enforcement action involved multiple county district attorneys and resulted in an injunction that mandated operational changes, including the establishment of a dedicated online portal for cash-out requests and updated disclosures regarding gift cards.

It's also important to note that regulatory enforcement is not the only source of risk. Plaintiffs' attorneys have also pursued class action claims premised on alleged violations of California's gift card laws in state and federal courts in California.

Companies should assume that noncompliance with the gift card redemption law will invite scrutiny from both regulators and private litigants—particularly following a statutory change that increases potential exposure.

Common Compliance Pitfalls for Companies
Here are some common areas where companies may encounter compliance problems:

- Outdated Policies: Written policies that still reference a $10 cash-out threshold.
- Lack of Employee Training: Training for employees, especially front-line staff handling gift card transactions, may be lacking or inconsistent.
- Point-of-Sale System Limitations: Some point-of-sale systems may not provide options for cash refunds.
- Unclear Cash-Out Mechanisms: Electronic gift card programs may lack a clear process for cash redemptions.
- Conflicting Terms and Conditions: Terms and conditions—whether listed online or printed on cards—may conflict with legal requirements.

Enforcement actions show that even well-intentioned programs can create risks if consumers' rights to cash redemption are not clearly communicated and easily accessible.

Looking Ahead
The statutory change is straightforward, but implementation can be challenging, especially for companies operating across multiple platforms or jurisdictions.

Because statutory exceptions and compliance mechanisms depend on specific program details, companies should review their gift card practices now to minimize risks when the new threshold takes effect.

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Tariffs Will Remain the Centerpiece of the Trump Administration's Trade Agenda

By: David J. Ribner and Alexander Ely

Since the start of President Trump's second term, the Administration has been clear that it will rely on tariffs as a major component of its trade and economic agenda, as the government seeks to bolster domestic manufacturing, to counter Chinese industrial power, and leverage tariffs as a tool for achieving foreign policy aims.

Though the Administration suffered a setback earlier this year when the Supreme Court found the primary law President Trump had been relying on to impose tariffs was unlawful (the International Emergency Economic Powers Act or IEEPA), the Administration quickly pivoted to using other statutory trade authorities to keep tariffs in place, including authorities that have never been used previously.

Statements made by the President and by key members of his trade team—including the Secretary of Treasury, the Secretary of Commerce, and the United States Trade Representative—make clear that tariffs are here to stay for the duration of the Administration. However, they are not static. Tariff rates may continue to change on certain products or on goods from particular countries as the Administration uses tariffs as a bargaining chip in bilateral trade negotiations.

For businesses, whether those that import directly or rely on imported goods in their supply chains, the overruling of the IEEPA tariffs created both opportunities to recoup costs as well as litigation risks. The IEEPA tariff experience also demonstrates the importance of monitoring tariff-related developments as companies with touchpoints to international trade prepare strategic plans and assess business risks through the remainder of the Trump Administration's time in office.

Trump Tariffs and the IEEPA Ruling

Shortly after taking office, the Trump Administration invoked IEEPA, a law traditionally relied on for economic sanctions, to impose tariffs, initially on Canada, China, and Mexico, and then across-the-board "Liberation Day" tariffs. In February 2026, the Supreme Court held that IEEPA did not grant the President authority to impose tariffs.

Almost immediately after the Supreme Court ruling, the Administration began to invoke other tariff authorities, including those never used before, to achieve similar baseline tariff rates. Initially, the Administration imposed a 10% universal tariff for five months under authority to address balance of payment issues (Section 122 tariffs), which was then found unlawful by Court of International Trade and is subject to ongoing appellate litigation. When the balance of payments tariffs expired, the Administration used another law to impose tariffs of 10% or 12.5% to address unfair trade practices stemming from the ostensible failure of many countries to prevent the use of forced labor (Section 301 tariffs), which is also subject to litigation. The Trump Administration also imposed 50% tariffs on certain goods from Canada relying on a never-before-used law authorizing tariffs to address foreign discrimination against the United States (Section 338 tariffs).

Collectively, the Trump Administration's actions since the Supreme Court's ruling demonstrate that tariffs will continue to be a centerpiece of its economic policy agenda, both as a mechanism to raise revenue and incentivize industrial shifts, as well as a powerful means of leverage in foreign policy negotiations.

IEEPA Remedies For Importers

While IEEPA tariffs are no longer in place, since the Supreme Court ruling, importers have grappled with its after effects. First and foremost, importers who collectively paid hundreds of billions of dollars in tariff duties are owed refunds with interest. Following a wave of lawsuits in the Court of International Trade after the Supreme Court ruling, Customs announced the creation of a new online portal—the Consolidated Administration and Processing of Entries (CAPE) system—where importers could apply for refunds.

To date, however, the CAPE system is only open to applications for refunds on some, but not all, IEEPA tariffs. The government has taken the position that it lacks the authority to issue refunds for certain "finally liquidated entries" without an importer-specific court order. To obtain all refunds, therefore, many importers have resorted to filing their own lawsuits to force Customs to make them whole. However, even importers that have obtained court orders remain in a state of flux as Customs has not yet opened its process to accept applications for all refunds. Guidance from Customs on the timeline for these refunds is expected in the near future.

Going forward, in the event litigation concerning the Section 122, 301, or 338 tariffs imposed post-IEEPA ruling are similarly found unlawful, there could be further opportunities for additional refunds. Tracking tariff duty payments and monitoring ongoing tariff-related litigation are prudent steps to take as these events continue to unfold.

Litigation Against Importers Following Tariff Payments

Importers eligible for IEEPA tariff refunds may also face litigation risk from their customers and purchasers if IEEPA tariff costs were passed on. Plaintiffs have filed individual and class action lawsuits against major importers alleging damages from the passing on of IEEPA tariff duties that have since been refunded under various legal theories, including violations of contract law, state consumer protection law, and tort law.

While these lawsuits are still in their early stages, they suggest that importers who paid tariffs and raised prices could face future litigation, particularly if they obtain refunds from the government for some of these costs. At the same time, they also present a potential avenue to relief for companies that purchased goods from importers at higher prices.

Implications for Businesses

Businesses can be confident that tariffs will continue to be a cornerstone of the economic environment for the duration of the Trump Administration. Companies with supply chains extending outside the United States are wise to monitor these developments, particularly as they evolve during the course of trade negotiations.

Importers that paid IEEPA tariffs but have not obtained full refunds should assess their options to ensure they receive all amounts owed, which may require litigation against Customs.

At the same time, businesses that paid additional tariff costs—particularly those that received communications from importers that their purchasing costs were being raised because of tariffs—should likewise consider the various paths available to recovery.

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Robo Bosses on Notice: California's New AI Workplace Laws Are About to Reshape How Employers Use Automated Tools

By: Vince Verde, Esq. and Daniel Payán, Esq.

California employers who rely on artificial intelligence to manage their workforce just got put on notice. Two bills from the 2026 legislative session — both awaiting the Governor's signature — are poised to impose significant new restrictions on how employers use automated tools in the workplace.

The timing is no accident. AI has moved well beyond résumé screening and chatbot recruiting. Today's workforce management platforms use algorithms to score employee performance, monitor productivity in real time, flag attendance patterns, recommend disciplinary action, and even detect worker sentiment through voice and biometric analysis. California legislators have decided the law needs to catch up. If your organization uses AI-driven performance management, productivity monitoring, or workforce analytics of any kind, now is the time to pay attention.

California is on the precipice of imposing new restrictions on artificial intelligence in the workplace with Assembly Bill 1883, a measure that passed with strong bipartisan support and is now awaiting Governor Newsom's signature. If signed into law, the bill would make California the first state to prohibit employers from deploying any AI-powered surveillance tools to monitor an employee's emotional state or to collect neural data — information generated by measuring the activity of an employee's central or peripheral nervous system. The prohibition would apply broadly, covering not only private-sector employers but all branches of state and local government, charter cities, the University of California, school districts, and entities that contract with labor contractors.

If that sounds like science fiction, it is not. Earlier this year, Burger King announced a rollout of an AI assistant called "Patty" that is integrated into employee headsets and capable of identifying when workers use phrases associated with friendliness. Wellness platforms marketed to employers now offer stress-detection features that analyze vocal tone, facial microexpressions, and even physiological indicators. AB 1883 draws a firm line: employers may continue to use workplace monitoring tools for safety and operational purposes, but any tool that crosses into emotion recognition or neural-data collection will carry up to a $500-per-violation civil penalty backed by an enforcement framework rather than around a single mechanism. Specifically, enforcement via AB 1883 consists of a layered system that includes per-violation civil penalties, Labor Commissioner or public prosecutor enforcement, civil actions with injunctive relief, punitive damages, and attorney's fees and costs all working in concert.

The more sweeping measure is Senate Bill 947, the "No Robo Bosses Act," which passed the legislature on August 31 and must be acted on by the Governor by September 30. SB 947 has a backstory worth noting: its predecessor, SB 7, passed both chambers last year but was vetoed by Governor Newsom. Senator Jerry McNerney reintroduced the concept in February 2026 with revisions, and SB 947 has gained significant momentum since.

At its core, SB 947 would prohibit employers from relying solely on an automated decision system to make discipline or termination decisions. Where an employer primarily relies on an automated system's output, a human reviewer must independently corroborate the decision using the underlying data or other relevant supporting information. If the output cannot be corroborated — or if the reviewer concludes it is inaccurate, incomplete, or misleading — the employer is flatly barred from using it. The bill also prohibits the use of automated systems to predict whether an employee will engage in protected activity, such as filing a complaint or joining a union, and then take adverse action based on that prediction. SB 947 further requires employers to provide affected employees with a written post-use notice at the time of a discipline or termination decision, explaining that an automated system was involved, providing contact information for the human reviewer so the employee may request more information, and including an anti-retaliation provision.

The practical reach of these bills is broader than many employers may realize. SB 947's definition of "automated decision system" is expansive enough to encompass not just purpose-built AI platforms but also the algorithmic features embedded in everyday performance management software, productivity dashboards, attendance tracking systems, and scheduling tools. Many employers do not think of these products as "AI," but if the tool processes employee data and generates recommendations or scores that feed into adverse employment actions, it could trigger compliance obligations under the new law.

These bills also do not exist in a vacuum. California's Automated Decisionmaking Technology regulations under the California Consumer Privacy Act took effect on January 1, 2026, and give businesses using Automated Decisionmaking Technology until January 1, 2027, to be in compliance. These regulations separately require employers to provide notice, conduct risk assessments, and honor opt-out and access requests when using automated tools for significant employment decisions. Federal guidance from the EEOC has likewise clarified that existing anti-discrimination laws apply to AI-driven hiring and management tools. The result is a rapidly thickening web of overlapping obligations that employers must navigate simultaneously.

For Orange County employers — particularly in the technology, healthcare, logistics, and staffing sectors where automated workforce tools are most prevalent — the compliance checklist should start now. Here is where to begin:

First, conduct an inventory. Identify every platform, tool, or software feature across the employment lifecycle — recruiting, onboarding, performance management, scheduling, productivity monitoring, and separation — that incorporates any form of automated analysis or recommendation. Many of these tools are purchased from third-party vendors, and employers may not fully understand how they generate their outputs. Under these new laws, that is no longer a viable defense; the obligations fall on the employer, not the vendor.

Second, assess exposure under AB 1883 specifically. Any tool with emotion-recognition or neural-data capabilities — including wellness apps, coaching platforms, and sentiment-analysis features — must be flagged and evaluated before January 1, 2027.

Third, begin building the human-review infrastructure that SB 947 would require. That means designating qualified reviewers, establishing documented procedures for corroborating automated outputs before adverse actions are taken, and creating the notice templates and data-access workflows the law mandates. Employers that wait until the effective date to design these processes will find themselves exposed.

California has long led the nation in employment law, and these bills are no exception. The speed of AI adoption in workforce management has outpaced the legal frameworks governing it, and Sacramento is moving aggressively to close that gap. The message to employers is clear: AI can inform your decisions, but it cannot make them for you. The sooner organizations internalize that principle and build their compliance infrastructure around it, the better positioned they will be — not just for these laws, but for the wave of regulation that is certain to follow.

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The AI Efficiency Trap: Managing the Legal Risks of Workplace AI

California employers are embracing artificial intelligence (“AI”) faster than most policies and certainly faster than legislation can keep up. From résumé screening software to generative tools that draft e-mails and summarize documents, AI has become a fixture in the modern workplace, promising real gains in efficiency and cost savings if utilized effectively. But the same tools that speed up hiring, restructuring, and everyday projects can also open the door to discrimination claims, data breaches, lost trade secrets, and privacy violations. Employers who treat AI as a plug-and-play efficiency tool, without addressing the legal exposure it creates, are taking on risk they may not even know exists.

AI in Hiring and Personnel Decisions: Mind the Bias Baked Into the Algorithm

Employers are increasingly outsourcing hiring and personnel decisions to AI, including screening applicant résumés, ranking candidates, and selecting employees for layoff. As employers transition these hiring and termination decisions to AI, risks abound related to AI algorithms inadvertently (or gleaning from employer past practices) replicating or amplifying potentially biased decision-making based on race, gender, age, or disability. Recently, in Mobley v. Workday, a California federal district court is allowing a nationwide collective action to proceed under discrimination laws, on the theory that Workday’s AI-powered applicant screening platform was acting as an agent of the employers using its software, and screening tools to allegedly discriminate against applicants over 40 years of age. This ruling forecloses employers from asserting “the algorithm did it” as a defense, and exposes employers to liability stemming from algorithms outside of their direct control.

California already regulates the use of automated tools in employment decisions through multiple legal frameworks. Regulations enforced by the California Civil Rights Department make clear that an employer’s use of an automated-decision system may violate California’s antidiscrimination laws. Separately, regulations adopted under the California Consumer Privacy Act govern certain uses of automated decision-making technology (“ADMT”). Beginning January 1, 2027, covered businesses using qualifying ADMT to make significant employment decisions must comply with requirements that include pre-use notice and certain access and opt-out rights, subject to specified exceptions. Meanwhile, SB 947, the pending ‘No Robo Bosses Act,’ would impose additional requirements on employers using automated decision systems (“ADS”) in certain disciplinary, termination, and related decisions. For reductions in force (“RIF”), employers should exercise caution when using AI tools to identify which roles or employees to eliminate without meaningful human oversight regarding disparate impact, the same analysis employers already run on any anticipated RIF list. As set forth above, any biased-decisioning, whether inadvertently by way of a third-party algorithm or intentional, employers cannot abscond from liability through indemnification or blame third parties.

Top 5 Recommendations to Mitigate AI-Generated Risk in Employment Decisions:

- Inventory every AI tool involved in hiring, promotion, discipline, terminations, or layoff decisions, including tools embedded in existing technology programs.
- Require human oversight to review and explain any AI-influenced outcome – put the personal back in personnel.
- Ask vendors about their bias testing, require bias testing to be incorporated into the vendor contract, and conduct internal bias testing prior to implementation for any personnel decisions.
- Update governance policies regarding the use of AI with respect to hiring, disciplinary, and termination decisions, and provide training to designated personnel responsible for use of these AI tools.
- Maintain records of the criteria and data used for at least four years.

Confidentiality Policies Haven’t Caught Up to ChatGPT

An immediate and evolving concern is potentially outdated confidentiality policies. An increasingly common scenario employers are encountering: an employee receives a written performance review, wanting help drafting a response, the employee pastes the entire document, inclusive of non-public confidential information (such as customer account and contact information) into a public AI tool to generate a response. That confidential, and potentially privileged, customer and/or personnel information now lives on a third-party server outside the company’s control, with no way to retrieve or delete it. This is particularly problematic in light of existing data breach laws, having significant impact heavily regulated industries, such as financial services, which require robust protection of customer information. Not only could employers be exposed to potential liability from their customers as a result of a public disclosure, such disclosure may result in regulator or other government entity investigation, resulting in penalties or other enforcement action(s).

The same risk applies to work product. An employee using a public AI tool to help draft a technical document, analyze data, or brainstorm a new product feature may be disclosing confidential company information or a not-yet-patented invention to an outside system. Public disclosure of an invention, even inadvertent, can jeopardize intellectual property protections and has the potential to impact patent deadlines or defeat patentability altogether, and such disclosure can significantly undercut trade secret protection by destroying the information’s confidential status.

Practical steps:

- Update confidentiality policies to specifically address utilization of generative AI.
- Prohibit inputting confidential, proprietary, or personnel information into any AI tool not approved by the company.
- Identify and approve a short list of AI tools with appropriate data protection terms, so employees have a sanctioned alternative to public tools.
- Conduct employee training related to confidential information in the AI context.

Conclusion

While the debate rages at both the federal and state level regarding regulation of AI and the speed of its development and integration into personal and professional use, employers must be cognizant of the potential liability lurking in algorithms, develop policies to ensure protection of confidential and proprietary information, develop disclosure protocols to employees regarding use of AI tools for employment decisions, properly train employees on the use of AI in the workplace, and review existing and future vendor contracts to address bias, data protection, and confidentiality. The foregoing will ensure that employers are well-positioned to capture risks, mitigate potential liability, and brace themselves for the new frontier of this burgeoning technology.

CDF can help your company evaluate its use of workplace AI, develop compliant policies and employee disclosures, train personnel, and review vendor agreements to address discrimination, privacy, data-security, and confidentiality risks.

Ashley A. Halberda is the Orange County Office Managing Partner of CDF Labor Law LLP, a California-based labor, employment and immigration defense law firm with offices throughout the state. Ashley advises and defends employers in a wide range of employment matters, including wrongful termination, discrimination, harassment, wage-and-hour, class action and Private Attorneys General Act (PAGA) claims. She is also a frequent speaker, author and trusted resource to California employers. Ashley can be reached at ahalberda@cdflaborlaw.com.

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Rosie Swenson, Eoin Kreditor, Miranda Lentz, Christopher Lentz, Cheryl Lentz, Alex Calabrese, Ben Drutman, Vera Thompson, Curt Scheetz, and Donald Verleur

When a community comes together, extraordinary things happen: children find safety, families find hope, and brighter futures begin.

The Buildings Are Complete.
Now, Help Make Them a Home.

These new homes provide more than just a safe place to live. For a young adult who has experienced uncertainty, having a place to call home can change everything. These apartments provide a foundation for stability and independence. **Your generosity can help make that possible and transform a life.**

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GRANTED IN THE BOARDROOM, DIVIDED IN FAMILY COURT

By **Paul Nelson, Esq**

Compensation committees spend months designing equity grants. Vesting schedules balance retention against dilution. Performance conditions align incentives. Then an executive divorces, and a family court judge apportions the entire structure using a fraction drawn from cases decided when the Apple IIe was cutting edge.

California treats stock options and RSUs granted during marriage as community property to the extent they were earned during the marriage, even if they vest long after the spouses separate. The operative word is earned, and it does more work than most plan documents anticipate. An unvested grant is not merely an expectancy. It is an asset, and the community may own a slice.

The apportionment math comes from two Court of Appeal decisions: *In re Marriage of Hug* (1984) 154 Cal.App.3d 780 and *In re Marriage of Nelson* (1986) 177 Cal.App.3d 150. The second case involves an entirely different Nelson, a point the author confirms with some relief. Both cases use a time rule, a fraction determining how much of each grant belongs to the community. The difference is where the clock starts. Hug runs the numerator from the start of employment, on the theory that the options rewarded the employee's overall service. Nelson runs it from the date of grant, on the theory that the options were incentives for future performance. Same executive, same grant, meaningfully different division depending on which formula the court finds appropriate. Courts have broad discretion to fashion whatever fraction fits the evidence, which means the outcome turns on what the paper trail shows the grant was for.

That is where general counsel enter the story, years before any petition is filed. The recitals nobody reads become the evidence everybody reads. A grant letter describing an award as recognition for past contributions invites a Hug analysis. One framed as retention for future service points toward Nelson. Neither is wrong. But drafting with indifference means the characterization gets decided later, by strangers, in a courtroom down the hall from the traffic division.

Two housekeeping points follow. Transfer restrictions in the plan do not defeat the community interest; courts simply award the employee spouse the shares and compensate the other spouse with offsetting assets, or reserve jurisdiction until vesting. And a divorcing executive remains subject to the plan while also owing statutory disclosure duties to a spouse, a tension best managed with a protective order rather than optimism.

Equity compensation is designed in conference rooms and divided in family court. The documents drafted in the first room decide most of what happens in the second.

BakerHostetler

Your Contract Says One Thing. But What Will the Arbitrators Say?

By Marco Molina, Alexandra Trujillo

Arbitration is built on party autonomy. Parties choose arbitration because they want a private, enforceable, and reliable way to resolve disputes. They also choose the governing law, seat, rules, and often the arbitrators. But unlike litigants, parties who arbitrate have little opportunity to correct legal or interpretive errors through appeal. Party choice and commercial certainty are weakened when tribunals allow fairness or equitable balancing to displace contractual text.

As more high-value commercial disputes move to arbitration, interpretive methodology matters. Contract-interpretation disputes remain common, arbitration volumes continue to rise, and the amounts in dispute are increasing. The consequences of interpretive error are therefore significant.

This raises the central question: when is a tribunal engaged in disciplined interpretation, and when has it departed from text in the name of broader arbitral judgment?

I. Why Textualism?

Textualism Protects Party Autonomy

Textualism gives primacy to the legal relationship the parties expressed in writing. Contract language allocates risk, prices uncertainty, defines performance, and sets remedies. When a tribunal moves beyond those words too quickly, it risks substituting its own view of commercial reasonableness for the bargain—a risk heightened in international arbitration, where tribunals often reflect different legal traditions.

Common-law jurisdictions generally treat contractual text as the best evidence of intent and enforce clear language according to its ordinary meaning. Civil-law systems often give greater weight to common intention, good faith, and surrounding conduct. French law, for example, looks to common intention over literal meaning, while Spanish law permits intent and conduct to inform unclear terms.

Context can prevent false clarity and account for imperfect drafting. But when context replaces rather than illuminates text, arbitrators risk diluting the bargain through fairness, good faith, or commercial sensibility untethered to governing law. Though courts reject obvious policymaking, subtler arbitral drift is harder to correct.

Textualism Promotes Predictability

International arbitration brings together parties, counsel, and arbitrators from different legal traditions. A text-first approach helps ensure that outcomes turn on the chosen law rather than arbitral instinct. Begin with the words, read them in the agreement as a whole, give effect to the parties' allocation of risk, and consider extrinsic evidence only where the governing law permits and the text is genuinely ambiguous or incomplete.

This approach does not erase differences among legal systems; it helps ensure the differences are applied transparently, not smuggled into the award.

Textualism Makes Commercial Sense

Contracts are legal instruments of risk allocation. A termination clause, indemnity cap, limitation of liability, payment milestone, or exclusive remedy may appear harsh after the fact. But that harshness may reflect price, leverage, risk appetite, or negotiated compromise. The fact that an arrangement "worked out badly, or even disastrously" for one party is not a reason to depart from the words' natural meaning.[1] The same discipline is essential in arbitration: a tribunal relying on hindsight to soften clear contractual language risks converting interpretation into reallocation of risk.

Textualism is therefore not anti-commercial. Rather, it respects the commercial deal as expressed.

Arbitration Magnifies the Consequences

Interpretive discretion exists in every adjudicative system. In arbitration, however, the consequences are magnified because there is generally little or no merits appeal. If a tribunal misconstrues the contract or applies an interpretive method inconsistent with the governing law, the losing party has limited recourse.

Textualism reduces that risk by anchoring interpretation in the words the parties chose. It narrows outcomes driven by philosophy, legal culture, or hindsight—especially in high-value commercial or founder disputes, where later changes in enterprise value can create pressure to recast the original bargain.

Textualism Does Not Mean Blind Literalism

Textualism is not crude literalism. Contracts are read as a whole, and words derive meaning from syntax, structure, defined terms, and commercial setting. A textualist tribunal may consider purpose, transaction architecture, and trade usage where the governing law permits, but not to displace the text. A robust textualist approach orders ambiguity, context, and subjective nuance appropriately, and gap-fills only if there is a genuine omission.

[1] Arnold v Britton [2015] UKSC 36, ¶ 19.

The Real Risk: Arbitral Overreach

The real concern is that contextual reasoning, if untethered from governing law and contractual text, can become arbitral paternalism—i.e., protecting a party from its bargain or supplying a rule the tribunal considers fairer, more efficient, or commercially sensible. Stolt-Nielsen is the clearest U.S. example, where the tribunal imposed class arbitration based on policy, not agreement.[2]

At bottom, arbitrators derive their authority from the parties. So if the parties authorize equity-based decision-making, the tribunal may use it. But if they do not, the tribunal should not reach the same result indirectly by recasting clear contractual language.

II. Implementing Textualism in Arbitral Practice

Textualism has practical consequences at every stage of arbitration:

A. Drafting the Arbitration Agreement and Governing Law Clause

Parties seeking textual discipline should say so expressly. They should choose a law that enforces commercial contracts as written, define key terms carefully, use integration clauses, specify the role of trade usage, and state whether the tribunal may decide disputes ex aequo et bono or as amiable compositeur.

B. Selecting Arbitrators

Arbitrator selection should account for interpretive philosophy. Counsel should assess candidates' writings, speeches, available awards, and background to ensure they will apply the methodology required by the chosen law.

C. Framing the Merits Case

Merits submissions should track the contract's design: defined terms, cross-references, remedies, conditions, and exclusions. Counsel should avoid broad fairness themes and show why the requested outcome follows from the text under governing law.

[2] Stolt-Nielsen S.A. v. AnimalFeeds Int'l Corp., 559 U.S. 662 (2010); see also Anheuser-Busch, Inc. v. Beer, Soft Drink, Water, 280 F.3d 1133 (7th Cir. 2002).

D. Managing Evidence

Tribunals should separate evidence that clarifies contractual language from evidence that varies or improves it. That discipline matters because arbitral evidence rules often give tribunals broad discretion over weight and materiality.

III. Conclusion

The textualist approach advanced here is text first, not text only. Context, commercial reality, and trade usage may inform interpretation, but they should elucidate the parties' words, not replace them. That discipline promotes predictability, respects risk allocation, and limits interpretive drift in a system with diverse legal traditions and little merits review. If arbitration is chosen to enforce a bargain, the bargain's text should remain central.

Marco Molina is a partner in BakerHostetler's International Arbitration and Litigation Practice and leads the firm's International Commercial Arbitration Practice. He represents multinational companies, investors and sovereign states in high-stakes international disputes, including commercial and investment arbitration, cross-border litigation, and the enforcement of judgments and arbitral awards. His practice spans industries ranging from energy and infrastructure to technology, digital assets and blockchain.

Alexandra (Allie) Trujillo is a senior associate in BakerHostetler's International Arbitration and Litigation Practice. She represents U.S. and international companies in courts and arbitral tribunals worldwide, handling complex cross-border disputes. Her practice focuses on energy, breach of contract, commercial fraud, trade secret disputes and financial matters. She further advises on cross-border judgment and award enforcement, global asset tracing and recovery efforts, and matters involving the rapidly evolving digital assets and blockchain sector.

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Of course, most cases settle. But settlement leverage is shaped by what the other side believes will happen if the matter proceeds. When opponents know a firm is prepared to try a case, and has the record to prove it, they evaluate risk differently.

As Orange County recognizes the General Counsel whose judgment and leadership help guide organizations through critical moments, Keller Anderle Scolnick proudly supports and serves this community with trusted representation when a dispute puts the business, its assets, or its future on the line.

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The Fine Print of Legal Representation: What Every Business Owner Should Know About Legal Malpractice

I've sat across the table from a lot of business owners over the years, and the stories sound oddly similar. An acquisition closes, and only later does the buyer realize the liability they took on was never fully disclosed. A tax bill shows up that should have been caught earlier. Most owners assume they just got unlucky.

Sometimes that's exactly what happened. But sometimes the problem isn't luck at all.

What You're Actually Owed
Under California law, your attorney owes you more than just showing up. They're required to handle your matter with real skill and care, follow your instructions instead of their own agenda, keep you informed along the way, and protect what you tell them. That's the legal standard.

California requires attorneys to get your informed consent before continuing under a conflict, but in practice, a lot of "informed consent" forms get signed without anyone truly understanding what they were consenting to. If that sounds like something you've been through, it's worth a second look.

So What Can You Actually Recover?
Two things, generally. First, the direct financial hit. The difference between the outcome you got and the outcome you should have gotten. Second, California law allows for fee disgorgement, meaning any fees your attorney collected while working against your interests have to be handed back.

The hard part is proving the first piece. You can't just show that a mistake happened; you have to show what would have happened without it. That often means essentially rebuilding the deal or re-trying the case that should have occurred, which lawyers call the "case within a case." It's tedious, technical work, and it's a big part of why legal malpractice tends to be its own specialty.

If Something Feels Off, Do This First
You don't need to hire anyone to protect yourself right now. Write down what happened and when, in as much detail as you can remember. Request your complete file from your attorney. You're entitled to this even if you still owe them money. Don't sign anything new in the meantime, especially releases or revised fee agreements. Pin down two dates specifically: when the mistake happened, and when you found out about it, since malpractice claims run on strict deadlines. And get a second opinion.

Why We Do This
Legal malpractice is a narrow field, and it's a special area of practice here at Stalwart Law Group. Our senior attorneys are California State Bar Certified Specialists in legal malpractice, a credential very few attorneys in the state hold. We've tried cases on both sides of the courtroom, plaintiff and defense. That combination is part of why Stalwart Law Group has recovered more than $500 million for our clients, including multiple seven and eight-figure results against firms far larger than ours.

If any of this sounds familiar, it's worth a conversation. Book a free consultation, and let's talk about what happened.

Dylan Ruga is a trial lawyer specializing in complex litigation, recognized as a Southern California "Super Lawyer." Known for his tenacity and professionalism, Ruga has built a reputation as a dedicated advocate who consistently achieves results. Ruga is certified by The State Bar of California as a specialist in legal malpractice law.

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Friends First, Founders Second

Your best friend just pitched you a business idea over coffee, and you are already imagining the possibilities. Starting a company with friends sounds like a dream — shared goals, mutual trust, built-in motivation. But before you agree to the venture, you need to have some candid conversations. Agreeing on a few critical issues upfront can mean the difference between a thriving business and a fractured friendship.

Ownership
Start by deciding how to split equity. Ownership should reflect what each founder brings to the company in terms of capital, time, skills, or intellectual property such as patents or proprietary technology. Be honest about who is contributing what. Most startups also vest founder equity over time, typically on a four-year schedule with a one-year "cliff," meaning no shares vest until the first anniversary, then vest monthly after that. Vesting protects everyone: if a co-founder leaves early, the remaining founders are not left giving away a large share of the company for little work.

Roles and Compensation
Agree early on who does what. Define each founder's role, title, and day-to-day responsibilities, and be specific about the time each person will commit. Decide how compensation will work during the lean startup phase and how it will evolve as the company grows. These conversations can be uncomfortable, but ambiguity here will lead to resentment later.

Planning the Exit Before You Enter
No one launches a business expecting a breakup, but experienced founders plan for one. Put a buy-sell agreement in place from day one that spells out what happens if a founder leaves voluntarily, is terminated for cause, or faces death or disability. The agreement should cover how equity will be valued and repurchased and include non-compete and confidentiality terms that apply after departure.

Here is the real test: if you and your friends can talk through these issues honestly and still want to work together, you are ready to bring in legal counsel, form the company, and put your agreement in writing. The friendship that survives the hard conversations is the one destined to last.

Ralph H. Winter is a partner in Snell & Wilmer's Orange County office and a member of the firm's corporate and securities practice group. He represents businesses, investment groups, and individuals in mergers and acquisitions, venture capital and financing transactions, and general corporate matters across a range of industries. Winter can be reached at rwinter@swlaw.com.

BUILDING MOATS AROUND YOUR ASSETS

"Lawsuits are cheaper to discourage than to win."

A lawsuit can be exhausting and expensive even when the defendant ultimately prevails. Legal fees, discovery, court appearances and business disruption can make the process itself a punishment. Thoughtful asset-protection planning creates legal "moats" around valuable assets, making them more difficult and costly for future claimants to pursue.

Q: What is an asset-protection "moat"?

Like the barrier surrounding a castle, a legal moat helps separate selected assets from potential liabilities. These protections may include properly structured trusts, limited liability companies, corporations and appropriate insurance.

The goal is not to conceal assets or evade legitimate obligations. It is to arrange ownership lawfully, before a dispute arises, so that one claim does not threaten an Entire financial foundation.

Q: Can asset protection discourage lawsuits?

Yes. Potential claimants and their attorneys typically consider whether litigation is worth the time, expense and risk. When assets are lawfully protected and difficult to reach, an aggressive lawsuit may become less attractive.

While no structure can prevent every claim, effective planning can change the economics of litigation and discourage speculative or opportunistic actions.

Q: How can planning improve settlement leverage?

If a lawsuit is filed, protected assets may strengthen the defendant's negotiating position. When prolonged litigation is unlikely to produce a substantial recovery, opposing parties may be more willing to consider a reasonable settlement.

Resolving a dispute earlier can reduce legal costs, business disruption and emotional strain.

Q: What tools are commonly used?

Asset-protection strategies may include domestic or foreign irrevocable trusts, Ll Cs, corporations, secured financing and liability insurance.

Each tool serves a different purpose. Business entities can separate personal wealth from operating risks. Certain trusts may place assets beyond the reach of future personal creditors. Insurance can provide a first line of defense by covering qualifying claims before personal assets are exposed.

The appropriate combination depends on the assets involved, the owner's objectives, applicable law and the risks being addressed.

Q: When should someone begin planning?

Before a lawsuit, claim or foreseeable dispute exists. Transfers made after trouble arises may be challenged as fraudulent and could be reversed by a court.

Planning early provides more lawful options and allows the strategy to evolve alongside a person's wealth, business interests and family circumstances.

Q: Why is experienced guidance important?

A carefully designed legal moat can help deter claims, improve settlement leverage and preserve wealth, family security and peace of mind.

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Jason Anderson - Shareholder, *Stradling*

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.

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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.

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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.

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Michael I. Katz is the Managing Partner of Katz Ruby Carle LLP, a Chambers®-ranked litigation firm based in Costa Mesa known for its sophisticated handling of high-stakes intellectual property and business disputes. Before founding Katz Ruby Carle, Katz was a partner at Morrison & Foerster LLP. Katz is recognized as one of the leading trade secret lawyers in California. He currently represents InnoPeak Technologies in a high-profile trade secret dispute with Apple related to Apple Watch health-sensing technology, MaxLinear on claims that Comcast misappropriated technology critical to the operation of Full Duplex (FDX) DOCSIS networks, and BioCorRx in asserting trade secret claims related to addiction treatment modalities. A formidable force in any legal forum, Katz combines legal excellence with strategic discretion, earning him the respect of clients, colleagues, and adversaries alike.

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Christian J. Keeney is a principal in the Orange County, California, office of Jackson Lewis P.C. Keeney is an accomplished litigator and trusted advisor to a national base of corporate clients. Whether it is a high-stakes lawsuit or a sensitive internal matter, clients appreciate Mr. Keeney's strategic and collaborative approach to employment law matters. Keeney represents employers in the full spectrum of employment litigation, including wage and hour class actions and PAGA representative actions, as well as individual claims of harassment, discrimination, retaliation, and wrongful termination. Beyond the courtroom, Keeney serves as a day-to-day strategic partner helping clients navigate an often confusing mix of federal, state, and local employment laws. He is recognized by Chambers & Partners and has been quoted on employment law matters in publications, including the Wall Street Journal.

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. To her client's interests, Kingston identifies issues for each transaction—helping her clients weigh the pros and cons—and actively works on fostering the partnerships required for a successful transaction. She also has a general corporate practice, advising management teams, boards, and other governing bodies on securities compliance, fiduciary duties, and other corporate responsibilities. Kingston serves as O'Melveny's Firmwide Hiring Partner, responsible for managing recruiting efforts across O'Melveny's 17 offices.

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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. In addition, Lee is an independent Board Director for Hanmi Bank (NASDAQ:HAFC) serving on the Nominating and Corporate Governance, Risk Compliance and Compensation and Human Resources committees. She has been honored with several national and state awards for both her legal skills and her community advocacy.

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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.

Susan Natland - Partner, Co-Leader of BakerHostetler's Global Trademark and Brand Protection Team, *Baker & Hostetler LLP*

Susan Natland, a Chambers-ranked attorney and nationally recognized trademark litigator and counselor, serves as co-lead of the Global Trademark and Brand Protection team. Natland is uniquely ranked by the World Trademark Review in both Enforcement/Litigation and Prosecution/Strategy, reflecting her exceptional ability to guide clients through every stage of trademark, brand protection, enforcement and litigation. Natland advises some of the world's most well-known brands across litigation, enforcement, trademark procurement, portfolio management and global brand strategy. Known for her strategic, creative, responsive and results-driven approach, Natland invests deeply in understanding each client's business and goals to deliver practical, efficient solutions that enhance and protect brand value. Her diverse client base spans multiple industries and include Mattel, lululemon, Fox Media, Public Storage, Rivian, Olaplex, Thorne Research, Playtika, MySpace, Acorns Grow, Chicken of the Sea, Arbonne, Fear of God and Simkhai. Natland's practice covers domestic and foreign trademark selection and clearance, trademark counseling, ex parte and inter partes proceedings before the Trademark Trial and Appeal Board (TTAB), licensing, trademark audits, domain name disputes, trademark strategy and procurement, counterfeit enforcement, customs matters, advertising law, copyrights, entertainment law, rights of publicity and intellectual property issues involving artificial intelligence.

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, Mirranda, 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.

Sheila Swaroop - Partner, *Knobbe Martens*

Sheila Swaroop is a Partner and Chair of Litigation at Knobbe, Martens, Olson & Bear, LLP, where she has practiced for over 25 years. A registered patent attorney, Swaroop has litigated over 100 intellectual property cases across federal district courts, the International Trade Commission (ITC), and the Patent Trial and Appeal Board (PTAB). She co-chairs the firm's ITC Litigation practice and brings deep industry experience in life sciences, pharmaceuticals, medical and dental devices, and consumer goods—representing clients from high-growth innovators to global market leaders. Swaroop is a founding member and past President of the Howard T. Markey Intellectual Property Inn of Court. She has served as a member of the Ninth Circuit Judicial Conference, a board member of the Orange County chapter of the Association of Business Trial Lawyers, President of the South Asian Bar Association of Southern California, board member of Working Wardrobes, and a trustee of Harbor Day School.

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. Verde 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. Verde 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. He draws on his skills as a trial attorney in order to successfully resolve matters early in litigation or obtain dismissals through summary judgment.

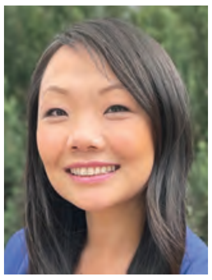
Peter Villar - Office Managing Partner, *Troutman Pepper Locke LLP*

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 (2026), and Commercial Litigation (2026).

2026 General Counsel Bios

Acorns Grow Incorporated, Irvine

Liz Nie, General Counsel & Corporate Secretary



Acorns Grow Incorporated is a privately held fintech company headquartered in Irvine, California, with a mission to look after the financial best interests of the up-and-coming. Founded in 2012, Acorns has grown into a global financial wellness platform offering products including Acorns, Acorns Early, GoHenry and Pixpay, helping customers build long-term wealth through saving, investing, retirement, and financial education tools. Liz Nie serves as General Counsel and Corporate Secretary, leading Acorns' global legal function across multiple products and countries while overseeing key areas including procurement and regulatory compliance. Her broad experience spans late-stage fintech, global enterprise and consumer technology, media, and complex corporate transactions. Before joining Acorns, Nie held senior legal roles at NBCUniversal and WeWork, where she oversaw commercial, product, and sales legal matters for a $3B+ annual revenue business spanning 40 countries. She began her career at Cravath, Swaine & Moore LLP, where she managed securities, banking, and M&A transactions. Nie brings global perspective, governance judgment, and pragmatic legal leadership to Acorns' continued growth.

Alpha Motor Corporation, Irvine

Jada (Soyun) Lee, Co-Founder, President & Chief Legal Officer

Jada S. Lee serves as Co-Founder, President, and Chief Legal Officer of Alpha Motor Corporation, a privately held Irvine-based EV company, previously nominated for the OCBJ Innovator of the Year and Excellence in Entrepreneurship awards. In her dual executive and legal leadership role, Lee directs legal strategy, corporate governance, regulatory compliance, intellectual property protection, and complex commercial transactions as Alpha Motor advances its proprietary EV platform toward commercial production. Throughout her 20-year legal career, Lee has architected over $20 billion in total transaction volume across capital markets, private equity, cross-border M&A, and energy sectors. At Alpha Motor, she has leveraged this extensive transactional foundation to establish robust corporate governance frameworks, structure strategic transactions, and secure global patent protections for the company. Prior to co-founding Alpha Motor, Lee served as a corporate attorney at leading international law firms, including Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe LLP, DLA Piper, and Loeb & Loeb LLP. She was also General Counsel & Chief Compliance Officer at a private equity firm that managed over $14.5 billion in AUM.

Ambry Genetics Corporation, Aliso Viejo

Michelle Smith, General Counsel & Corporate Secretary

Michelle Smith is the General Counsel and Corporate Secretary of Ambry Genetics Corporation, a healthcare genetic testing company headquartered in Aliso Viejo, California. Founded in 1999, Ambry has grown substantially, culminating in its landmark acquisition by Tempus AI, Inc. for over $600 million in February 2025. Smith has led Ambry's legal functions since 2016, guiding the company through this transformative growth. She was promoted to General Counsel within her first year and immediately proved her value by steering Ambry's first acquisition to Konica Minolta in 2017. Since then, her expanding mandate has included overseeing Ambry's compliance functions and modernizing its legal department with specialty practice areas. In April 2024, she and her team engineered the sale of a Konica Minolta subsidiary for over $100 million. Today, Smith leads a legal team that has more than doubled in size since she became General Counsel, serving as a trusted advisor to Ambry's board and executive leadership across M&A, employment, governance, compliance, IP, cybersecurity, privacy, FDA regulation, and litigation.

Ambry Genetics Corporation, Aliso Viejo

Michelle Smith, General Counsel & Corporate Secretary; Alex Luu, Assistant General Counsel; Carol DeFreitas; Sr. Corporate Counsel; Erika Christiansen, Sr. Corporate Counsel; Lee Meryash, Sr. Corporate Counsel; Andrew Falk, Corporate Counsel; Brandon Cha, Corporate Counsel; Michelle Manu, Director, Legal Operations & Data Privacy Officer

Founded in 1999, Ambry Genetics Corporation is a $100 million-plus genetic testing laboratory. Its high-performing legal team provides comprehensive support spanning complex commercial transactions, employment law, compliance, privacy, intellectual property, and litigation management. The team has been foundational to Ambry's major corporate milestones. They successfully guided the company through its up to $1 billion sale to Konica Minolta in 2017, the 2020 acquisition of GenomeSmart, and the $600 million sale to Tempus AI, Inc. in February 2025. Operationally resilient, the team helped steer Ambry's COVID-19 pandemic response, managing the legal framework for test offerings and a critical Orange County Health Care Agency partnership while also addressing the needs of its own on-site, hybrid, and remote workforce. By diligently protecting the business and supporting its operational initiatives, the team directly empowers Ambry to advance precision medicine, promote better health outcomes, and drive scientific progress. Reflecting this profound organizational and scientific impact, the team earned consecutive OnConferences Top 100 Corporate Counsel Team Awards alongside multiple OCBJ Legal Team nominations.

Arbonne International, LLC, Irvine

Bernadette Chala, Chief Legal Officer

Arbonne is a Certified B Corporation and Delaware public benefit corporation, a global leader in plant-based personal care, nutrition, beauty, and wellness sold through a global network of Independent Consultants and 300 employees. For more than four decades, Arbonne has empowered people to flourish through sustainable, healthy living, earning a B Corp recertification score of 119.9, well above the 50.9 median. Recent momentum includes 2025 launches of HerCore Essentials and the NAD+ Cellular Energy system, a new 2026 Irvine headquarters, and a third consecutive Great Place To Work® certification. Bernadette Chala is Arbonne's Chief Legal Officer, overseeing the Legal team, privacy and data protection, regulatory and scientific affairs, and the Business Ethics & Sustainability Team (B.E.S.T.), which oversees direct selling compliance. She has built an AI-first legal function and leads Arbonne's regulatory and public-policy response to intensifying oversight of the direct selling industry. A UCLA Law graduate and California Bar member, Chala happily uses Arbonne's products every day and reminds you that you are only as old as your skincare regimen.

Arbonne International, LLC, Irvine

Bernadette Chala, Chief Legal Officer; Jacintha Parker, Senior Director, Legal Compliance, BEST (Business, Ethics, Sustainability Team); Reynaldo Pitpit, Senior Director, Regulatory & Scientific Affairs; Nitin Gupta, Senior Director, Data Protection Officer; Daryl Martin, Senior Director, Commercial Contracts; Donny Rios, Contracts Manager, Donna Finegan, Legal Operations Administrator; Kristi Wray, Manager Compliance (BEST); Chris Montellano, Manager Compliance (BEST); Marcus Ostergaard, Manager Compliance (BEST); Bianca Sole De Cortes, Compliance Training Manager (BEST); Yanely Murillo, Case Manager, Legal Compliance (BEST); Gina Vescovi, Case Manager (BEST); Jonathan Christensen, Compliance Analyst (BEST); Alejandro Pascual, Compliance Analyst (BEST); Chris Long, Senior Manager Regulatory & Scientific Affairs; Kari Serruys, Senior Manager Regulatory & Scientific Affairs Sneha Alexander, Regulatory & Scientific Affairs Specialist I; Alyssa Hardy-Russell, Regulatory & Scientific Affairs Specialist II; Maria Morales-Farias, Regulatory & Scientific Affairs Specialist II; Ana Ramirez, Regulatory & Scientific Affairs Specialist II

Arbonne is a Certified B Corporation and Delaware public benefit corporation, a global leader in plant-based personal care, nutrition, beauty, and wellness sold through a global network of Independent Consultants and 300 employees. For more than four decades, Arbonne has empowered people to flourish through sustainable, healthy living, earning a B Corp recertification score of 119.9, well above the 50.9 median. Recent momentum includes 2025 launches of HerCore Essentials and the NAD+ Cellular Energy system, a new 2026 Irvine headquarters, and a third consecutive Great Place To Work® certification. Led by Chief Legal Officer Bernadette Chala, Arbonne's in-house legal team spans legal, contracts, data protection, regulatory and scientific affairs, and its Business Ethics & Sustainability Team (B.E.S.T.). Together they safeguard compliance across Arbonne's full portfolio of cosmetics, health and wellness, and nutrition products, pairing an AI-first approach with hands-on partnership, coaching the business on marketing claims, advancing global privacy protections, and driving Arbonne's public-policy response to intensifying direct selling regulation, all grounded in a collaborative, service-oriented culture.

Blank Rome LLP, Irvine

Sharon Klein, Partner

Blank Rome is an Am Law 100 firm with 16 offices and more than 750 attorneys and principals who provide comprehensive legal and advocacy services to clients operating in the United States and around the world. The firm has built a reputation for its leading knowledge and experience across a spectrum of industries and is recognized for its commitment to pro bono work. Since 1946, Blank Rome's culture has been dedicated to providing clients top-level service. Sharon Klein holds several senior leadership roles, including Vice Chair of Artificial Intelligence, Co-Chair of the Privacy, Security & Data Protection practice, Managing Partner of the Orange County office, and a member of the firm's executive committee. She has been

RUTAN

Excellence. Integrity. Teamwork.

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Guided by a culture of excellence, integrity, and inclusion, and a longstanding commitment to community leadership, Rutan continues to set the standard as Orange County's premier law firm, with offices across California and Arizona.

AREAS OF PRACTICE

Corporate and Tax / Employment

Government and Regulatory / Intellectual Property

Land Use and Entitlement / Litigation and Trial / Real Estate

ORANGE COUNTY / PALO ALTO / SAN FRANCISCO / SCOTTSDALE / **RUTAN.COM** instrumental in building a nationally recognized privacy and cybersecurity practice that supports clients across healthcare, life sciences, and technology. Klein's work is informed by over four decades in the field, including 12 years as associate general counsel at Siemens Medical Solutions. Today, she advises companies on the use of AI in environments where precision and judgment carry real-world consequences.

Calm, Palo Alto

Melissa Bergeron, Vice President & Deputy General Counsel

Melissa Bergeron is Vice President & Deputy General Counsel at Calm, a leading consumer mental health company whose products help millions of people sleep better, stress less, and live more mindfully. Calm has been recognized as a TIME100 Most Influential Company and one of Fast Company's Brands That Matter. Bergeron is a recognized strategic legal executive whose leadership has enabled innovation across some of the technology industry's most highly regulated products. She advises executive leadership at the intersection of artificial intelligence, healthcare, consumer protection, privacy, payments, and global product compliance, helping organizations navigate complex regulatory landscapes while accelerating responsible growth. Throughout her career, Bergeron has built and led high-performing legal teams at multiple companies, guided transformative product launches, negotiated strategic commercial partnerships, and developed governance frameworks that allow businesses to innovate with confidence. Before moving in-house, she managed complex international litigation and regulatory matters at White & Case, representing leading global technology companies.

CHAGEE USA, Irvine

Scott Hampton, General Counsel

CHAGEE is one of the world's fastest-growing premium tea beverage brands, operating more than 7,000 locations globally and rapidly expanding throughout North America. Since 2025, Scott Hampton has helped the company open 11 new teahouses in California so far (Century City, Del Amo, Brea, Sherman Oaks, Long Beach, Culver City, Ontario, Glendale, Mission Viejo, Orange and San Diego). More locations at South Coast Plaza (Costa Mesa), Valley Fair (San Jose) and San Francisco are coming soon. As General Counsel and Head of Legal & Compliance for North America, Hampton serves as a key strategic advisor supporting CHAGEE's market expansion, regulatory compliance initiatives, intellectual property protection programs and commercial operations. With decades of legal experience spanning corporate governance, compliance, commercial transactions and brand protection, Hampton has played a central role in helping CHAGEE establish and scale its U.S. operations. Working closely with executive leadership, he oversees legal strategy for new market entry, franchise and retail expansion, employment and regulatory matters, intellectual property development and risk management.

Clean Energy Fuels Corp., Newport Beach

Katie Klein, Deputy General Counsel

Katie Klein serves as Clean Energy's Deputy General Counsel, providing strategic legal guidance and leading the company's business transactions team. She has structured, negotiated, and closed many of the company's most complex and strategically significant transactions, supporting growth and innovation in a rapidly evolving energy market. In addition to her transactional practice, Klein provides legal leadership across compliance, project financing, litigation, corporate governance, real estate, and legal operations. Her work has been instrumental in strengthening major customer relationships, expanding market opportunities, mitigating enterprise risk, and advancing the company's long-term growth strategy. During her tenure, Klein has supported Clean Energy's mission of decarbonizing transportation through the development, procurement, delivery, and distribution of renewable natural gas (RNG), a sustainable fuel produced by capturing methane from organic waste and converting it into a low- or negative-carbon transportation fuel. Through Clean Energy's network of fueling stations across North America and its RNG production facilities, the company helps thousands of vehicles reduce greenhouse gas emissions and supports the transition to cleaner transportation solutions.

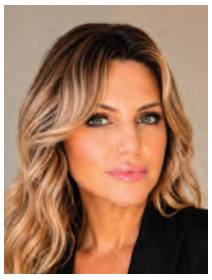
Clever Care Health Plan, Huntington Beach

Sabrina Topps, Senior Vice President of Legal & Regulatory Affairs and Chief Compliance Officer

Sabrina Topps is a seasoned healthcare executive and attorney with extensive experience leading legal, regulatory, compliance, privacy, audit, and governance functions for health plans across Medicare, Medicaid, and commercial lines of business. As Senior Vice President of Legal & Regulatory Affairs at Clever Care Health Plan, she serves as a strategic advisor to executive leadership and the Board of Directors, overseeing Legal and Regulatory Affairs, Compliance, Privacy, Special Investigations, Payment Integrity, and Government Affairs programs. She is responsible for interpreting and operationalizing complex federal and state healthcare regulations, mitigating legal and regulatory risk, supporting corporate governance, and advising on contractual, operational, and strategic initiatives that drive organizational growth and compliance. Throughout her career, Topps has successfully navigated complex regulatory environments, including CMS program audits, financial audits, privacy investigations, accreditation reviews, and state regulatory examinations. She is recognized for her ability to translate complex legal and regulatory requirements into practical business strategies, build high-performing teams, and position compliance and legal functions as strategic business partners.

ConsumerDirect, Inc., Irvine

Steffani Stevens, Sr. Exec Vice President, General Counsel & Secretary



ConsumerDirect, founded in 2003 and headquartered in Irvine, California, is a leading nationwide consumer financial technology company serving consumer subscribers through approximately 5,000 distribution partners and has a significant intellectual property portfolio with 23 granted patents. The company has helped millions of customers to take charge of their credit, finances, privacy, and now lending, through its products enhanced by its groundbreaking Max AI™ engine. The company has demonstrated exceptional scale and disciplined execution, achieving 45% compound annual revenue growth from 2017 to 2025. ConsumerDirect has been recognized as a Top Workplace in Orange County for five consecutive years, reflecting its commitment to innovation and organizational excellence. Steffani Stevens, Senior Executive Vice President, General Counsel & Secretary, is a seasoned legal executive who brings together law, finance, technology, and business strategy to help companies grow responsibly and make sound decisions in complex environments. Her background includes private and public company experience, top-tier law firm practice, and multiple General Counsel roles, with experience spanning enterprise risk, strategic transactions, securities, governance, and regulated financial products. At ConsumerDirect, Stevens partners with executive leadership to support innovation, strategy, compliance and strong legal and regulatory foundations. She is known for bringing clarity, judgment, and integrity to complex matters while helping organizations move forward with confidence.

Domino's Pizza, Irvine

Neha Jaiswal, Director, Senior Corporate Counsel

Domino's is the largest pizza company in the world, with more than 22,100 stores across over 90 markets. Over the past 65 years, Domino's has become one of the world's most recognized consumer brands. Neha Jaiswal is Director, Senior Corporate Counsel at Domino's. She advises on global franchising, strategic commercial transactions, and emerging technology matters, responsible for supporting the company's 90+ international markets. Jaiswal partners closely with business leaders on franchise development, market expansion, strategic initiatives, and complex cross-border transactions throughout Domino's global system. In addition to her international legal responsibilities, Jaiswal leads legal oversight of AI governance initiatives, advising on the responsible deployment of emerging technologies, AI risk management, policy development, and enterprise governance frameworks. Her practice sits at the intersection of business growth, technology innovation, and legal risk management. With more than a decade of experience at Domino's, Yum! Brands, Taco Bell, and Billabong, Jaiswal brings a unique perspective on the convergence of franchising, intellectual property, and AI governance.

El Pollo Loco (NYSE: LOCO), Costa Mesa

Kimberly Bernstein, Costa Mesa

Kimberly Bernstein is General Counsel of El Pollo Loco, Inc. (NYSE: LOCO). Prior to joining El Pollo Loco in October 2025, Bernstein spent 6 years at Taco Bell where she quickly rose to serve as Taco Bell's Global Legal Director, Litigation, Labor and Employment. Bernstein's impact at El Pollo Loco has been nothing if not immediate – in her short tenure, she has assumed responsibility for El Pollo Loco's risk management functions, implemented a cutting-edge employee and workplace safety program, instituted legal operation functions to better allow the legal department to support the business organization, and took on the role of privacy officer. Praised for her depth of knowledge and ability to deftly lead projects to completion, Bernstein is also commended for her business acumen and commitment to innovation and excellence.

Glaukos Corporation, Aliso Viejo

Robert Davis, Sr. Vice President, General Counsel & Business Development; Diana Scherer, Vice President, Deputy General Counsel & Corporate Secretary; Sara Kerrane, Vice President, Intellectual Property, Litigation and Regulatory Counsel; Brandy McCracken, Sr. Director, Patient Advocacy; Charles Kamen, Vice President, Chief Compliance Officer; Kathleen Lynch, Government Affairs; Marin Burns, Business Development and Corporate Strategy Manager; Stacey Fahrner, Vice President, Government Affairs; Ryan Smith, Head of Business Intelligence & Strategy; Serene Smith, Patient Engagement Director; Manon Maarschalkerweerd, Sr. Director, International Compliance; Meredith Kolasa, Director, US Compliance; Taylor Payne, Compliance Specialist; Cliff Wongkoltoot, Manager, Compliance; Lori

2026 General Counsel Bios

Malland, Sr. Compliance Specialist; Gretchen Hudson, Senior Contracts Attorney; Jennifer Cannivet, Senior Counsel; Madison Johnston, Corporate Paralegal; Mary Naggs, Corporate Attorney; Matthew Kim, Sr. Contracts Lawyer; Jeffrey Lau, Associate General Counsel, Commercial; Mike Cho, Principal Patent Agent

Glaukos is an ophthalmic pharmaceutical and medical technology company focused on developing and commercializing novel therapies for the treatment of glaucoma, corneal disorders, and retinal diseases. Glaukos first developed Micro-Invasive Glaucoma Surgery (MIGS) as an alternative to the traditional glaucoma treatment paradigm which proved unsuccessful in saving the sight of many patients. In 2024, Glaukos addressed another patient need with the iDose® TR, a first-of-its-kind, long-duration, intracameral procedural pharmaceutical designed to deliver 24/7 glaucoma drug therapy inside the eye for extended periods of time. Glaukos also markets the only FDA-approved corneal cross-linking therapy utilizing a proprietary bio-activated pharmaceutical (Epioxa®) for the treatment of keratoconus, a rarely diagnosed corneal disorder. Glaukos continues to successfully develop and advance a robust pipeline of novel, dropless platform technologies designed to meaningfully advance the standard of care and improve outcomes for patients suffering from chronic eye diseases, preserving sight for lifetimes. At Glaukos, the in-house legal team embodies the company mantra "We'll Go First." Every day, the legal team performs the foundational work that supports Glaukos' extensive innovation -- creating and protecting its intellectual property, identifying and negotiating new business opportunities, and guiding its colleagues on all matters of compliance, regulation and legal matters. Glaukos' legal team continues the Company's legacy as a pioneering force in the pharmaceutical and medical device industry by leading not only the Company' legal matters, but also all of its business development, government affairs and patient advocacy roles. The in-house legal team also collaborates with the departments that research, develop, engineer, and market Glaukos' ophthalmic innovations, making it possible for underrepresented and underserved patients to access life-changing and sight-saving technologies.

Healthpeak Properties, Inc. (NYSE: DOC), Irvine

Carol Samaan, Senior Vice President – Corporate Administration, Deputy General Counsel, & Corporate Secretary

Carol Samaan is Senior Vice President – Corporate Administration, Deputy General Counsel, and Corporate Secretary at Healthpeak Properties, Inc. (NYSE: DOC), a publicly traded S&P 500 healthcare real estate investment trust, and at Janus Living, Inc. (NYSE: JAN), a senior housing real estate investment trust. Samaan serves in her role for both companies, overseeing all corporate legal matters, including board of directors relations, corporate governance, executive compensation, public company reporting, SEC matters, capital markets deals, employment law, and other legal matters. Samaan also oversees Human Resources for Healthpeak. Prior to joining Healthpeak, Samaan was Assistant General Counsel at Western Digital, a global technology company, where she focused on global corporate governance, compensation, employee benefits, and ESG matters. Samaan also spent several years working for leading global law firms, including Latham & Watkins LLP.

Hoag Memorial Hospital Presbyterian, Newport Beach

Eric Cheung, Senior Vice President, Chief Legal Officer, and General Counsel

Eric W. Cheung is Senior Vice President, Chief Legal Officer, and General Counsel of Hoag Memorial Hospital Presbyterian, a $2+ billion nonprofit health system and one of California's respected healthcare organizations. Joining Hoag in 2021 as its first in-house general counsel, Cheung played a central role in a disaffiliation restoring the organization's independence and rebuilding its governance framework for a new era of growth. As a member of Hoag's senior leadership team, he shapes enterprise strategy across growth, operations, risk, and innovation. He has led and supported strategies for major capital initiatives, the Sun Family Campus expansion in Irvine, and Hoag's migration to its own electronic health record instance. More recently, he led Hoag's pursuit of the 90+ acre Laguna Ridge property through a federal disposition process and legal challenge, supported the elevation of the Hoag Classic golf tournament to a premier PGA TOUR Champions event, and restored Hoag's independence in key ambulatory assets. Cheung's leadership has helped position Hoag as a destination health system, advancing access, digital innovation, and clinical excellence in Orange County.

Hyper Ice, Inc. ("Hyperice"), Irvine

Brian Arnold, Associate General Counsel & Head of Intellectual Property

Hyperice is an innovative company focused on athletic performance, warmup, and recovery technology that is used by the world's top professional and recreational athletes. Hyperice's technology has received numerous awards, including TIME's Best Inventions in 2026 and Fast Company's Most Innovative Companies in 2026. The company has grown steadily over the past several years, expanding into various product lines and partnering with Nike to develop groundbreaking wearable recovery technology. Brian Arnold served as lead outside intellectual property litigation and licensing counsel for several years before joining Hyperice in 2023. In his three years as Associate GC and Head of IP, Arnold has led Hyperice's patent enforcement, monetization, and defense, negotiating licenses with scores of companies and running over 30 patent lawsuits while overseeing the ever-expanding patent portfolio. Arnold's monetization efforts have contributed significantly to Hyperice's bottom-line revenue while substantially reducing outside counsel spend. Arnold reports that he thoroughly enjoys working with the talented, motivated professionals at Hyperice, and that he has never been more fulfilled in his 30 years as an attorney.

Hyundai Motor America, Fountain Valley

Jason Erb, Chief Legal & Compliance Officer

Hyundai Motor America, doing business as Hyundai Motor North America, is the operating subsidiary that oversees all operations of Hyundai Motor Company in Canada, Mexico, and the United States. Headquartered in Fountain Valley, it distributes, sells, and services a rich lineup of cars, SUVs, and electric vehicles through a nationwide network of over 800 independent Hyundai dealers. Through its Genesis luxury line, it also distributes, sells, and services Genesis vehicles through over 200 dealers. It also oversees manufacturing for vehicles produced at Hyundai's U.S. plants in Montgomery, Alabama and Ellabell, Georgia. Jason R. Erb is the senior vice president and chief legal and compliance officer for Hyundai Motor North America. Erb, who has been with Hyundai since 2002, is responsible for all legal matters across the region for the Hyundai and Genesis brands. This includes product liability, safety and warranty, intellectual property, risk management, cyber security, dealer franchise, environmental, and human resources, among other responsibilities. Erb also has oversight responsibility for all legal matters throughout the Americas.

Hyundai Motor America, Fountain Valley

Jamison Power, Director, Associate General Counsel – Litigation

Hyundai Motor America is the U.S. subsidiary of Hyundai Motor Company and is headquartered in Fountain Valley, California. Established in 1986, Hyundai Motor America oversees vehicle sales, marketing, distribution, customer experience, and related operations throughout the United States, supported by a nationwide dealer network and a significant U.S. workforce. Hyundai has become one of the fastest-growing and most influential automotive brands in North America, driven by sustained investment in innovation, electrification, vehicle quality, and customer experience. In 2025, Hyundai achieved its third consecutive year of record total U.S. sales, delivering approximately 901,686 vehicles, while also reaching its fifth consecutive year of record retail sales. Multiple vehicle lines, including the Tucson, Elantra, Santa Fe, Palisade, IONIQ 5, and Venue, achieved record sales performance. The company continues to expand its leadership in electrified mobility, with electrified vehicles accounting for approximately 30% of its retail sales mix in 2025. Through continued investments in technology, sustainability, and mobility solutions, Hyundai remains a recognized industry leader and one of Orange County's most prominent corporate employers.

Ingram Micro, Irvine

Augusto Aragone, Executive Vice President, Secretary & General Counsel

Augusto Aragone is the Executive Vice President, Secretary and General Counsel of Ingram Micro, a Fortune 100 global technology distributor with over $50 billion in annual revenue and operations in approximately 60 countries. As the company's principal legal and governance advisor, he advises the Board of Directors and executive leadership on public-company governance, capital markets, M&A, enterprise risk and strategic transactions. Since assuming his role in 2016, Aragone has played a central role in transformational milestones, including Ingram Micro's return to the public markets through an October 2024 initial public offering, several complex global transactions, and ownership transitions involving private equity sponsors. In addition to overseeing the company's global legal function, he leads ethical compliance, regulatory affairs, and physical security programs that support the organization's continued growth and resilience. A business attorney, Aragone joined Ingram Micro in 2008 after serving as Legal Director for Latin America at DHL. He holds law degrees from Uruguay, and the University of Miami, a master's degree in law and logistics from the University of Bologna, Italy, and is admitted to practice in New York.

Kind Lending, LLC, Irvine

Edgar Martinez, Chief Legal Officer

Edgar Martinez is Chief Legal Officer with Kind Lending, LLC, an Irvine-based independent mortgage bank licensed in 49 states. Employing nearly a thousand individuals across the country, Kind Lending is a recognized leader in wholesale

mortgage lending and a recipient of numerous industry awards. Martinez oversees all legal and compliance matters for the company, providing strategic counseling and legal support for internal clients across all core company functions, including production, operations, information technology, capital markets, treasury, credit, counterparty risk, vendor management, servicing, and human resources. Before Kind Lending, Martinez served as a Senior Counsel with loanDepot, another Irvine-based national mortgage lender. Martinez has also had in-house counsel roles with Healthpeak, a health care real estate investment trust, and American Advisors Group, a reverse mortgage lender. 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.

Mara Holdings, Inc., Irvine

Zabi Nowaid, General Counsel & Corporate Secretary

Zabi Nowaid is the General Counsel and Corporate Secretary of MARA, a publicly traded digital infrastructure and energy company at the forefront of the convergence of artificial intelligence, energy, and digital infrastructure. As a member of MARA's executive leadership team, he advises on the company's most significant strategic initiatives, commercial partnerships, governance matters, capital markets activities, and transformational transactions. Throughout his career, Nowaid has served as a strategic advisor to public and private companies navigating periods of rapid growth, market disruption, and strategic transformation. Prior to MARA, he served as Senior Vice President, General Counsel and Corporate Secretary of Open English, a global education technology company backed by leading private equity investors TCV and Insight Partners. He also served as General Counsel of Verb Technology Company, a Nasdaq-listed technology company that was later acquired, where he led legal strategy through a pivotal stage of the company's evolution and capital markets activities. Earlier in his career, Nowaid held leadership roles at Occidental Petroleum Corporation and California Resources Corporation.

Mario's Tree Service, Inc., Corona

David Owh, Executive Vice President & General Counsel

Mario's Tree Service, Inc. is a Corona-based professional tree service and vegetation management company serving residential, commercial, utility, and governmental customers, with approximately 500 employees and operations that have expanded well beyond Southern California. David Owh serves as Executive Vice President and General Counsel, combining legal judgment with day-to-day business leadership for a company operating in highly regulated, high-consequence environments. Under Owh's leadership, Mario's has broadened its work for utility companies, FEMA-related disaster response programs and governmental emergency support agencies across the country. He has helped position the company to meet the contracting, compliance, insurance, safety, and operational demands that come with public agency work, storm response, wildfire mitigation, and large-scale vegetation management. Owh's role extends beyond traditional legal oversight. He is a strategic advisor to ownership and management on growth, risk allocation, customer relationships, claims, procurement, and closing execution. His work has supported Mario's continued expansion while maintaining the discipline required to serve critical infrastructure and disaster-recovery customers.

Masimo, Irvine

Ahmad Qazi, Vice President, Associate General Counsel

Ahmad Qazi serves as Vice President, Associate General Counsel at Masimo, a global medical technology company whose monitoring technologies are used on more than 200 million patients annually in over 150 countries worldwide. Qazi has played a critical role in Masimo's story, guiding the company through a period of extraordinary growth and transformation. During nearly a decade with the Irvine-based company, Qazi has become one of its most trusted advisors on complex disputes and enterprise-critical matters. He has led legal strategy in high-stakes litigation, investigations, and cross-border disputes, including trials and international arbitrations in Asia, Europe, and North America. Most notably, Qazi partnered closely with outside counsel during Masimo's patent infringement jury trial against Apple in the Central District of California, helping secure a landmark $634 million jury verdict. Beyond litigation, Qazi has advised executive leadership on complex issues spanning more than 20 jurisdictions, activist campaigns, executive leadership transitions, and high-value corporate transactions. Most recently, he played a key role in Masimo's $9.9 billion acquisition by Danaher, helping the company navigate one of the most consequential events in its history.

MBK Real Estate Companies, Irvine

Anita Hsu, Senior Vice President and 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 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.

Monster Energy Legal Department, Corona

Paul J. Dechary, Executive Vice President & General Counsel; Patrick Crook, Senior Vice President & Deputy General Counsel; Alexa Lewis, Senior Vice President & Associate General Counsel; Aaron Sonnhalter, Senior Vice President & Chief Litigation Counsel; Elysha R. McMurtry, Vice President, Corporate Affairs & Sustainability; Brad Aaron, Vice President & Senior Legal Counsel; Mike Weir, Vice President & Senior Legal Counsel; Jaymee Castrillo, Vice President & Senior Legal Counsel; Carly Rothenberg, Vice President & Senior Legal Counsel; Justin Aida, Vice President & Senior Legal Counsel; Greg Gabriel, Vice President, Senior IP & Technology Counsel; Joseph Le, Senior Legal Counsel; Nancy Carreno, Director, Contract Management; Bruce Kingsland, Senior Director, Global Brand Protection; Kathleen Samsing, Senior Contracts Manager, Marketing; Darryl Roth, Senior Brand Protection Manager Nikki Ramos, Managing Paralegal, IP & Litigation; Alexis Fierro, Senior Corporate Paralegal; Kelsey Lewis, Senior Paralegal

The Monster Energy Legal Department is a trusted strategic partner to one of the world's leading beverage companies. Led by Executive Vice President and General Counsel Paul J. Dechary, its 35 attorneys, paralegals, and legal fessionals support a business that delivered $8.3 billion in net sales in 2025, with products sold in approximately 158 countries and territories. Though organized into specialized practice groups, the department operates as one team. It turns complex risk into practical solutions that let the business launch products, secure supply, enter new markets and close transformational deals. This is the team that powered landmark acquisitions, defended the brand in litigation that reshaped Lanham Act precedent, and built the marquee sponsorships that put Monster on jerseys, courts and fields worldwide. Lean, versatile and relentlessly business-minded, it protects and propels a global brand.

Orange County Department of Education, Huntington Beach

Greg Rolen, General Counsel

The Orange County Department of Education (OCDE) is the county's education service agency, providing direct educational programs, fiscal oversight, and strategic support to Orange County's 28 school districts, more than 600 schools, and approximately 450,000 students. Through its broad portfolio of educational, operational, and compliance services, OCDE plays a central role in advancing student achievement and strengthening public education throughout the region. Gregory J. Rolen has served as General Counsel for OCDE since 2014, advising the County Superintendent of Schools, Orange County Board of Education, and executive leadership on governance, education law, labor and employment, litigation, public contracting, constitutional compliance, and risk management. Under his counsel, OCDE has expanded its legal capabilities to meet the demands of a growing, increasingly complex education landscape, including charter school oversight and special education matters. In 2025, Rolen was nominated for the Orange County Business Journal General Counsel Rising Star Award and testified before both the California Joint Legislative Audit Committee and the Assembly Elections Committee.

Origence (CU Direct Corporation), Irvine

Jessica Sumikawa, Chief Legal Officer & General Counsel

Origence, the lending technology company formerly known as CU Direct, is an Irvine-based credit union service organization founded in 1994. Its connected platform supports more than 1,100 credit unions and nearly 20,000 automotive dealerships. In 2025, more than 2.2 million loans totaling $62 billion were funded through Origence platforms, representing over one-third of vehicle loans funded by the credit union industry. Jessica Mae Sumikawa serves as Chief Legal Officer and General Counsel, leading the Legal, Compliance, and Enterprise Risk Management functions. She advises on strategic legal initiatives, supports the development and launch of new products, and strengthens the company's risk and regulatory posture. Sumikawa

2026 General Counsel Bios

brings more than a decade of legal and executive leadership in highly regulated industries. Before joining Origence in 2025, she spent nine years in renewable energy, helping scale a fast-growing clean-energy company while managing complex regulatory, commercial, litigation, and corporate matters.

Pacific Life, Newport Beach

Tom Bilello, Vice President & Associate General Counsel

Tom Bilello leads a team of over 50 legal and compliance professionals in his role as a divisional general counsel. He is accountable for legal and compliance support to Pacific Life's Consumer Markets Division (CMD), supporting Pacific Life's retail life insurance and annuity businesses. CMD accounts for approximately 70 percent of Pacific Life's revenues. He serves on the senior leadership team of both Legal & Compliance and CMD, providing strategic advice and guidance. He also works closely with the Government Affairs team on legislative and regulatory changes. Bilello joined Pacific Life as an analyst in the Life Division's Advanced Designs Unit in 1994. In 1996, he took a position in the division's Compliance Department and in 2000 he was promoted to Assistant Vice President in the Compliance Department, with responsibility for market conduct compliance, including advertising compliance. Since 2021, he has been in his current role as a Vice President in the Legal & Compliance department overseeing the legal and compliance teams for both the retail life insurance and annuity business lines. Prior to joining Pacific Life, Bilello was engaged in private practice of law and advised clients on general business and corporate governance matters.

Prospera Hotels, Orange

Wendy Huang, Chief Legal Officer & General Counsel

A highly accomplished transactional attorney and litigator, Wendy W. Huang serves as Chief Legal Officer and General Counsel of Prospera Hotels, a leading hotel investment, development, and management company dedicated to creating exceptional hospitality assets and long-term value through strategic real estate investments. For more than six years, Huang has provided strategic legal leadership to Prospera, guiding the company through complex real estate investments, developments, operations, and business initiatives. Prior to joining Prospera, Huang served more than 10 years as Executive Vice President and General Counsel of Crown Realty & Development and more than five years as General Counsel of Olen Properties. Throughout her career, she has advised leading real estate companies on acquisitions, development, construction, leasing, financing, corporate governance, and complex commercial litigation. An immigrant who built a distinguished legal career while English is her second language, Huang has become a respected leader and trailblazer in the California legal community. She served for many years as Co-Editor-in-Chief of the California Litigation Review and has held leadership positions with the State Bar of California and California Lawyers Association.

Rivian, Irvine

Daniel Rogna, Senior Counsel, Trademark

As Senior Counsel, Trademark, Legal at Rivian Automotive, Daniel Rogna oversees trademark, branding, and intellectual property strategy for one of the most innovative and closely watched automotive companies in the world. Rivian has transformed the electric vehicle industry through its development of electric trucks, SUVs, software platforms, and next-generation mobility technologies. Rogna leads legal strategy for Rivian's global trademark portfolio, including trademark clearance, prosecution, enforcement, anticounterfeiting initiatives, domain name matters, product branding, trade dress protection, and emerging technology branding. Since joining Rivian, he has become a key strategic advisor for product launches, vehicle naming strategies, and intellectual property protection surrounding Rivian's rapidly expanding business and technology platforms. In addition to managing complex trademark portfolios and disputes on a global scale, Rogna works closely with business, product, marketing, engineering, and executive leadership teams to provide practical legal guidance that supports innovation while protecting Rivian's valuable brand assets. His collaborative leadership style and deep trademark expertise have made him a trusted advisor throughout the organization.

Roth Staffing Companies, Orange

Jennifer Simonson, General Counsel & Senior Vice President

Since its founding in 1994, Roth Staffing Companies has grown to become one of the largest privately held staffing firms in the United States, operating in more than 100 markets with over 500 coworkers nationwide. Recognized by industry leaders for its 100% organic growth, Roth Staffing Companies has consistently held a spot on Staffing Industry Analysts' (SIA) list of the largest staffing firms in the U.S. Known for its innovative approach, strong culture, and focus on relationships, Roth Staffing is guided by an

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unwavering commitment to its Purpose and Promise. The company provides customized workforce solutions through specialized business lines in administrative, finance & accounting, technology, and legal hiring—connecting top talent with organizations across a wide range of industries. Widely regarded as an industry leader, Roth Staffing Companies has also built a reputation as one of the best places to work, reflecting its dedication to both client success and employee experience.

Sandisk Corporation (NASDAQ: SNDK), Irvine

Jae Park, Vice President of Legal

Jae Park serves as Sandisk's ("Sandisk") Vice President, Legal, having moved to Sandisk upon its successful separation from Western Digital in February 2025. In his current role, Park leads the Strategic Transactions team within Sandisk's legal department. Prior to Sandisk, Park served as Assistant General Counsel at Western Digital since 2013. He was a key legal partner in every material strategic transaction at Western Digital since his arrival and continues to serve in that role for Sandisk today Park's primary area of expertise is on the corporate side but given his leadership abilities and collegial nature he has influence throughout the legal organization. Park is well known for his ability to cut through many details to get to the core issues of a problem. He has a strong business acumen and is well liked by his business colleagues as a true partner, and not just a legal gatekeeper like so many others can be. Park has the support of his entire organization and is well respected at both WD and Sandisk.

Super73, Inc., Irvine

Joe Geisman, General Counsel

Joe Geisman is a business-minded legal executive with more than 25 years of experience serving as both in-house and outside counsel. Throughout his career, he has served as a trusted advisor to boards of directors, CEOs, founders, and executive leadership teams across private, venture-backed, private equity-backed, and high-growth companies operating in consumer products, manufacturing, electric mobility, media, entertainment, technology and e-commerce. Known for his practical, business-focused approach, Geisman helps organizations accelerate growth, close complex transactions, and manage legal risk while enabling innovation. Geisman currently serves as General Counsel of Super73, Inc., where he leads the company's legal function and advises the company on virtually every aspect of the business, including corporate governance, commercial transactions, corporate finance, intellectual property, AI and emerging technologies, privacy, employment, manufacturing, supply chain, distribution, dispute resolution and enterprise risk management. Prior to Super73, Geisman served as Vice President and Deputy General Counsel at Playboy, and Senior Vice President, Global Content and Intellectual Property Protection at MGM Studios. Earlier in his career, he practiced with Greenberg Traurig LLP and Loeb & Loeb LLP.

Terumo Neuro (formerly MicroVention, Inc.), Aliso Viejo

Jacqueline Collins, General Counsel

MicroVention is a global leader in neurovascular technologies dedicated to advancing the treatment of stroke, aneurysms, and other cerebrovascular diseases. The company employs thousands of professionals worldwide and continues to expand its innovation footprint from Orange County, California. As Vice President, Law and General Counsel, Jacqueline Collins leads the company's global legal, intellectual property, compliance, governance, and litigation functions. With more than two decades of executive legal leadership experience in the medical device industry, she provides strategic guidance supporting innovation, international growth, regulatory compliance, and risk management. Since joining the company in 2022, Collins has played a critical role in guiding legal strategy during a period of significant organizational growth and transformation, including the company's transition to the Terumo Neuro brand and expansion of its global operations. She is widely recognized for building collaborative, business-focused legal teams that help drive innovation while safeguarding the company's valuable intellectual property and regulatory commitments.

Terumo Neuro (formerly MicroVention, Inc.), Aliso Viejo

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

Laura Vega is Deputy General Counsel and Senior Director, Head of Legal Affairs at Terumo Neuro, a Terumo Group company headquartered in Aliso Viejo, California. She leads legal support across the United States, Canada, and Costa Rica, partnering with colleagues throughout Terumo's global organization to advance strategic, compliance, and operational objectives. A proud Orange County native, Vega was born and raised in the region. Her deep roots have shaped her personal and professional journey, from beginning her legal career at the Irvine office of Jones Day to serving today as a senior legal leader for an Orange County-based medical technology

company. Before transitioning in-house, Vega practiced at Jones Day and Greenberg Traurig, where she represented clients in complex litigation, investigations, trials, and business disputes. Since joining Terumo Neuro in 2022, Vega has led initiatives supporting global growth, M&A and strategic investment transactions, compliance programs, product launches, and business transformation efforts. She also built and leads the legal team recognized by the Orange County Business Journal as the 2024 In-House Legal Team of the Year.

UC Irvine Campus Counsel, Irvine

Karen Carrillo, Paralegal and Executive Assistant to the Chief Campus Counsel and Principal Campus Counsel; George Choriatis, Principal Health Sciences Counsel; Andrea Gunn Eaton, Chief Campus Counsel; Carolyn Goldenberg, Senior Health Sciences Counsel; Wendi Meza, Executive Assistant to Health Sciences Counsel; Rebecca Millis, Legal Assistant; Kyle Rowen, Principal Campus Counsel; Peter Schneider, Chief Health Sciences Counsel; Kristina Strottman, Principal Campus Counsel; Ann D. Springer, Principal Campus Counsel

The UC Irvine Office of Campus Counsel, led by Chief Campus Counsel Andrea Gunn Eaton, serves as the trusted legal advisor to Orange County's only public research university and academic health system. The ten-member legal team provides strategic counsel to university and health system leadership on employment, labor relations, healthcare, procurement, research, intellectual property, athletics and NIL, real estate, governance, compliance, public records and litigation. More than legal advisors, Campus Counsel serves as an integrated strategic partner, helping advance UC Irvine's education, research and healthcare missions while thoughtfully managing institutional risk. The office has helped guide many of the university's most transformative initiatives, including the opening of UC Irvine Health's new all-electric acute care hospital, the acquisition and integration of the Orange County Museum of Art with UC Irvine's Langson IMCA, major campus expansion and housing projects, and the university's record-setting Brilliant Future campaign, which raised $2.4 billion. Through practical, collaborative counsel and deep institutional knowledge, the Office of Campus Counsel enables innovation, supports responsible growth and strengthens UC Irvine's impact across Orange County and beyond.

Viant Technology Inc., Irvine

Ritesh Patel, Chief Legal Officer & Corporate Secretary

Viant Technology, Inc. (NASDAQ: DSP) is a leading advertising technology company that enables marketers to execute people-based digital advertising campaigns across channels and devices. Founded in 1999, Viant's fiscal 2025 results included $344.2 million in revenue, and had approximately 380 employees across 10 North American offices. Since joining Viant in 2022 as Chief Legal Officer and Corporate Secretary, Ritesh Patel has served as a strategic advisor to the executive leadership team and board while overseeing the company's corporate, commercial, intellectual property, governance, compliance, and legal affairs. Patel brings nearly two decades of experience advising innovative technology companies. Prior to Viant, he held senior legal leadership roles at Apeel Sciences, The Trade Desk, and Western Digital, where he supported high-growth businesses, complex commercial transactions, public company reporting, and global business operations. At Viant, Patel's pragmatic and business-oriented approach has helped facilitate growth initiatives while effectively managing legal and regulatory risk in an increasingly complex advertising technology environment. His ability to align legal strategy with corporate objectives has made him a trusted partner to business leaders across the organization.

Western Digital Corporation, Irvine

Aaron Fennimore, Senior Director & Assistant General Counsel, Trademarks & Brand Protection

Western Digital Corporation (WD) is a publicly traded data storage leader delivering HDDs, systems, and personal storage solutions. Founded in 1970, WD reported $12.9 billion in fiscal 2026 revenue and employed approximately 40,000 people worldwide at the end of fiscal 2025. Aaron Fennimore serves as Senior Director and Assistant General Counsel at Western Digital, focusing on trademarks and brand protection. Fennimore's practice safeguards valuable WD brand assets across trademark infringement, global filing strategy, anti-counterfeiting, copyright, domain names, licensing and brand-use counseling. With more than 15 years of experience advising on trademark, copyright and domain-name protection, Fennimore helps preserve customer trust and channel integrity where counterfeit products, online misuse and brand dilution can affect reputation, revenue and consumer confidence. His work supports WD's innovation, product identity, and global commercial growth.

The 16th Annual
GENERAL COUNSEL AWARDS

Congratulations 2026 Nominees

16th Annual General Counsel Awards will recognize Orange County's outstanding in-house legal professionals and teams for their leadership and contributions to the business community.

Public Companies

Blank Rome LLP Sharon R. Klein
CHAGEE USA Scott Hampton
Ingram Micro Augusto Aragone
Mara Holdings, Inc. Zabi Nowaid
Viant Technology Inc. Ritesh Patel

Private Companies

Acorns Grow Incorporated Liz Nie
Alpha Motor Corporation Jada (SoYun) Lee
Ambry Genetics Michelle Smith
Arbonne Bernadette Chala
ConsumerDirect, Inc. Steffani Stevens
Hoag Memorial Hospital Presbyterian Eric Cheung
Hyundai Motor America Jason Erb
Mario's Tree Service, Inc. David Owh
MBK Real Estate Companies Anita Hsu
Prospera Hotels Wendy Huang
Roth Staffing Companies Jennifer Simonson
SUPER73, Inc. Joe Geisman
Terumo Neuro Jacqueline Collins

Specialty Counsels

Clean Energy Fuels Corp. Katie Klein
Domino's Pizza Neha Jaiswal
Hyper Ice, Inc. ("Hyperice") Brian Arnold
Hyundai Motor America Jamison Power
Masimo Ahmad Qazi
Orange County Department of Education Greg Rolen
Rivian Daniel Rogna
Western Digital Corp. Aaron Fennimore

Rising Stars

Calm Melissa Bergeron
Clever Care Health Plan Sabrina Topps
El Pollo Loco (NYSE: LOCO) Kimberly Bernstein
Healthpeak Properties, Inc. Carol Samaan
Kind Lending, LLC Edgar Martinez
Origence (CU Direct Corporation) Jessica Sumikawa
Pacific Life Insurance Co. Tom Bilello
Sandisk Corporation (NASDAQ: SNDK) Jae Park
Terumo Neuro Laura Vega

In-House Legal Teams

Ambry Genetics Corporation
Arbonne International, LLC
Glaukos Corporation
Monster Energy Legal Department
UCI Irvine Campus Counsel

Dinner Gala & Awards Program

October 29, 2026
6:30 - 8:30 p.m.

*Tickets: $350 /
Table for 10: $3150

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