

## THE BIG INTERVIEW

# Transparency, empowerment and connection

Washington, D.C. OEP Hansel Pham talks agile working, clients and more.

**W**hen Hansel Pham became the Office Executive Partner of the Washington, D.C. office in May 2021, he was confronted with the daunting challenge of taking over the office's response to the global COVID-19 pandemic and overseeing the transition to increased physical presence in the office after over a year of largely remote working.

"It was a truly challenging time, because everything was so unprecedented and uncertain," he says. "But I've come to find the experience gratifying and rewarding. The DC office and the Firm are emerging from this crisis stronger, more adaptable, and with greater capabilities to shape a more flexible way of working in the future."

Hansel was keen to hit the ground running as OEP and he started by making a concerted effort to connect directly with dozens of committees, departments, groups, and business leaders in the office.

"It required a very significant investment of time, but it was well worth it," he says. "Although I have been in the D.C. office of White & Case since 2002, I had previously been in my own bubble to some extent. But as OEP, I realized that I needed to understand the true breadth of all that we were doing here in D.C. so that I could represent the whole office to the best of my ability."

"I've now had the opportunity to meet many more colleagues across the office – not just to discuss how the D.C. office can support my own practice – but to understand better all their ideas and contributions. As a result, I now have a much better appreciation of the critical role all our teams in D.C. play in enabling us to be our best for our clients and the Firm."

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“All the input I’ve received has helped me shape my priorities as OEP. I am grateful for the support and feedback I have received – good and bad. I truly believe that it is vital to hear the full diversity of views, so I can advocate for and help make balanced decisions for the office.”

## Retaining a sense of culture

Hansel has several priorities for the office, with one being a constant effort to strengthen relationships and a sense of culture that has been transformed during remote working.

“This came out of the pandemic,” he says, “when we realized we’d no longer have the organic opportunities to talk to each other in the halls or over lunch. An important source of bonding and relationship building was not fully being replaced by virtual meetings. Much of the learning that comes from direct observation was more difficult to achieve. Training and development opportunities were curtailed or affected by being only remote.

“As the office continued with remote work, we worked hard to maintain our culture and togetherness through our newsletter, regular virtual group discussions and meetings where we told people about what was happening and gave them the context behind our decisions.

“We’ve continued this as we move towards agile working, with regular town halls and monthly Business Services leader meetings, round tables and committee meetings in person and virtually.”

## Caring for our people

The team has been putting a lot of effort into easing colleagues back into a gradual return to the office following the pandemic.

Hansel says: “The pandemic has been difficult for everyone, often in very different ways. Our challenge was how to protect our people while making sure that we can continue to give the same level of service to our clients.

“It’s been great seeing how we have united in many ways, with multiple remote events held during the pandemic, and we’ll continue to build on that as we move forward into a hybrid way of working.

The Washington, D.C. office is one of the largest in the Firm. Hansel says: “As you’d expect, the DC office plays a critical role in our work for many of the Firm’s biggest key clients, including Facebook, Saudi Aramco, Toshiba, Microsoft, GUPC, and many of our pharmaceutical clients, as well as a host of sovereign clients, such as Bulgaria, Uzbekistan, Sudan, India, and many others.

“We work on a lot of high-profile matters. Most recently, given what’s been happening in Ukraine, sanction-related matters are proving to be one of our most active and pressing areas. We’ve seen so many fast-moving developments in this area that impact the entire world, so virtually everyone is looking to our teams for expert advice.

“I’m proud of the level of support and expertise that is coming out of this office during this very urgent, difficult time for our clients and the Firm.”





## Breaking new ground

Despite being a very busy office, colleagues also find time for pro bono work.

Hansel says: "I'm proud that the DC office is consistently near the top of Firm offices when it comes to the breadth and depth of our participation in pro bono matters. The D.C. office has been the founding office for many initiatives, including the Veterans Initiative, which helps US military veterans pursue their disability benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs.

"I'm also very proud of the Racial Justice Task Force, which was founded and led by our Antitrust practice in response to events that rocked the US and the world in 2020. They're doing some truly incredible things (see our previous Reporter Quarterly feature for more information)."

**"The client experience is something we must put at the heart of our daily decisions and, as part of that, we want to continue to strengthen the collaborative culture here."**

Providing a client experience that sets the Firm apart from its competitors is also something that Hansel is placing high on his agenda as OEP.

He says: "Of course a lot of the responsibility for delivering this comes down to our lawyers, but we can contribute as an office by ensuring that, when clients or colleagues visit the D.C. office, they have an experience that is reflective of the Firm, our values and our distinctive approach.

"Our operations, facilities, reception, and hospitality teams have done so much to ensure everything is in top shape. In so many ways, we've enhanced the offering to our clients and visitors so that every aspect of a visit reflects a higher level of service and quality."

## Open and honest

In addition, Hansel sees the benefit of transparent communication in setting the Firm apart from our competitors.

He says: "The client experience is something we must put at the heart of our daily decisions and, as part of that, we want to continue to strengthen the collaborative culture here.

"Our individual practice areas recognize that it is not enough to pursue individual objectives. The client experience can only benefit if we share best practices and maximise cross fertilization and synergies, so our approach is consistent and joined up.

"The more that I have come to learn about what we do here, the more I see that the D.C. office has a compelling, and sometimes unmatched, offering in terms of our legal practices and services.

"This is recognized within the wider global Firm, and it is verified in our industry rankings and the comments from our clients. I look forward to amplifying and spreading this message throughout the broader market."

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