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Nutter to change leadership, with 2 partners sharing top spot

GREG RYAN
LAW AND MONEY REPORTER
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Nutter McClennen & Fish LLP's long-time managing partner Deborah Manus will step down from the position at the end of June, with two of the Boston law firm's partners taking her place.

Michael Scott, a partner in Nutter's real estate group, and Liam O'Connell, currently the chair of the firm's labor and employment practice, will share the role. They will lead one of the state's largest law firms, with approximately 150 attorneys in Massachusetts.

Manus has served as Nutter's managing partner since 2011. Prior to her tenure, the role did not come with a term limit, but the firm installed an eight-year cap when she took over, a move she supported.

She had shared the managing partner role with Bill Geary, but became the sole leader when Geary left for Mintz Levin Cohn Ferris Glovsky and Popeo PC in 2014. The firm's search committee didn't necessarily set out to once again name two managing partners, but its members felt Scott and O'Connell work well together, Manus said.

After she steps down as leader, Manus plans to focus on her estate and trust administration practice. Today, she is one of the few women to serve in the top role at Boston's largest law firms.

Asked about the fact she was being replaced by two men, Manus first quipped that "there's a joke in there somewhere" before backing the firm's diversity efforts.

"There's now been a second woman elected to the management committee. We have more women represented as department chairs now than we ever have in the past," she said. "I'm very optimistic about women in leadership within our walls."

In terms of the firm's business priorities going forward, Scott and O'Connell said they want to grow Nutter's corporate and intellectual property practices, among other areas.

"Given that this is an innovation economy, in large part, we want to continue to focus on intel-



Nutter's Liam O'Connell, Michael Scott and Deborah Manus.

lectual property and intellectual property litigation," Scott said.

Scott added that the corporate function is a "right place to grow. There's a multiplier effect in having corporate lawyers, given their clients have various needs and opportunities for cross-selling."

The duo will come into power with Boston's legal market as crowded as ever. Since the year Manus became managing partner, a dozen of the country's 100 highest-grossing law firms have opened Boston offices, including heavyweights like Kirkland & Ellis LLP, Hogan Lovells and White & Case LLP.

Legal industry consultants often point to Nutter as an attractive merger partner for law firms looking to enter the Boston market. All 150 of its attorneys are based locally, so a merger would give another firm a ready-made, large Boston office. Nutter's only offices are in Boston and Hyannis.

Under Manus' leadership, Nutter has rebuffed interest from other firms. Its executive committee recently discussed the topic, according to Scott. "There is not that level of receptiveness to that concept at this point in time," he said. "Our culture is really important to us. We believe in the model we have, because we see it work every single day."

But the firm's leadership may consider opening an office outside of Massachusetts, should

the right opportunity present itself, Scott said. "In the back of our minds, there's possibilities for us expanding geographically, but right now we're focused on making sure we've added to our strength and we have the right people in the right places in this marketplace."

Unlike many firms of its size, Nutter does not publicly disclose its revenue and profits. Manus did tell the Business Journal that revenue rose last year and that it is on track to increase again in 2019, potentially by as much as 7 percent. She said "the trend is positive" in terms of profitability.

Scott has been with Nutter for 20 years and is a member of its executive committee and co-chair of the group responsible for hiring away partners from other law firms. In the past two years, the firm has brought on new leaders for its mergers and acquisitions, privacy and data security, and banking and financial services groups. One of the new hires was Thomas Curry, the former U.S. Comptroller of the Currency.

O'Connell came aboard Nutter in 2008 from Holland & Knight LLP. He's also worked for Choate Hall & Stewart LLP and McDermott Will & Emery LLP. Like Scott, O'Connell has served on the executive committee.

"Both Mike and I have fairly active practices, which we hope to continue to grow. We both enjoy being practicing lawyers," O'Connell said. "The concept of the two of us taking on this task together, I think made sense."