

## Dream Team: The Multifaceted C-Suite That Guides Robins Kaplan Through COVID-19 and Beyond

In 1992, the U.S. men's Olympic basketball team earned the nickname, the "Dream Team." Described as the greatest sports team ever assembled, they defeated opponents by an average of 44 points. What was so different about this team? Many versions of the Dream Team's story point to a number of different factors. What stands out to me is the team's composition of professional ball players, when historically Olympic teams were comprised of amateur players. These were ball players at the top of their professional game. They had the ability to move quickly, anticipate plays, and outperform any opponent.

Business operations and corporate strategy, however, are nothing like basketball. The Dream Team played with an agreed-upon set of rules, structure, boundaries, game clock, and one simple objective—to put a rubber ball in a basket more times than their opponents. Winning a basketball game requires a finite skill set. In contrast, law firm leaders pursue hundreds of objectives, monitor a myriad of metrics, and utilize strategic plans to focus on primary goals—often not knowing for years if these core directional choices helped or harmed the firm. Olympic teams utilize weathered playbooks. There was no playbook for legal services' reaction to COVID-19.

The coaches who constructed the Olympic Dream Team focused on a narrow skill set. COOs must build their own teams with diverse expertise and wide-rang-

ing experience. A flood of research proves that teams with heterogeneous backgrounds are smarter, challenge each other's assumptions, and drive innovation. I've seen these benefits play out in the various roles I've held in major law firms over 25 years. I am fortunate to have worked with several great leaders and strive to emulate the best in them when building and leading a team that embodies strength,

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agility, and diversity.

Our Chief Business Intelligence Officer holds a Ph.D. in Materials Science and leads our group of specialized experts and consultants, including forensic and economic consultants, engineers and scientists, and our talented eDiscovery team. Our Chief Talent and Diversity Officer led a nonprofit during graduate school and worked as a tax lawyer for eight years before making the leap to law firm operations. Our CFO is a former leader in healthcare accounting. Our Chief Strategy and Marketing Officer started in journalism, then managed the firm's trial consulting department for over a decade, and also spent four years moonlighting in law enforcement. Our Chief Information and Technology Officer is the closest ex-

ample we have of following a traditional career path, spending a dozen years at an AmLaw 50 firm before honing his skills as CIO for a Midwest firm, then coming to Robins Kaplan. Through the sum of these experiences, knowledge, and talent, our team is able to draw upon its depth, face unprecedented challenges, and win.

Our team officially started preparing for the unexpected on March 2. On March 9, we began concrete discussions about working remotely as a proactive measure and how to prepare for that transition. On March 12, we began the mass remote exodus. Anyone who currently works for or has ever worked in a law firm knows how unfathomable it is to move to completely remote operations in the blink of an eye. Sure, remote work has been around for many, many years—it's the norm for some workers globally. The majority of law firms are adept at having their lawyers and senior leadership work remotely. Lawyers do it well and are self-sufficient, effective road warriors. We all work in airplanes, hotels, and from the occasional beach chair. However, moving non-lawyer professional staff out of the office is a different story and requires significant change.

The Great Recession spawned a more-for-less mindset. Corporate clients drove law firm efficiency, alternative fee arrangements, IT security, and expense predictability—but the Big Law business model remained mostly unchanged. Our operations team and executive board championed initiatives in recent years that made our move to remote work easy. For example, our Chief Innovation &



Shonette Gaston joined Robins Kaplan LLP as chief operating officer in 2017. As COO, she leads the business management of Robins Kaplan and oversees the daily operations of eight offices with over 250 attorneys across the country. She participates as a key strategic partner with the firm's Executive Board and works closely with senior leadership and department chairs, advising on the constantly evolving legal market and the firm's continued growth. Shonette directs a team of accomplished business professionals responsible for finance, technology, marketing, talent and diversity, pricing, legal project management, firm strategy, and other business functions of the firm.



**Mark Bradley**  
Chief Innovation &  
Technology Officer



**Shelley Gilliss**  
Chief Business  
Intelligence Officer



**Chandra Kilgriff**  
Chief Talent & Diversity  
Officer



**Daniel Owen**  
Chief Strategy &  
Marketing Officer



**Thomas Schwartz**  
Chief Financial Officer

Technology Officer made the decision to adopt Zoom firm-wide just months before COVID-19 made Zoom a household name. And our Chief Talent & Diversity Officer has been working closely with our legal project management and professional development teams to emphasize cross-office case staffing and develop metrics that help us quickly determine when someone has excess capacity so we can efficiently staff cases in a way that maximizes value to our clients.

When our team sat down the week of March 9 to talk about how to protect our firm members and clients by supporting remote work for the entire firm, it was an impressive operation. Each team member brought something unique to the table, and it wasn't necessarily based on the function of the team they oversee. They relied on their experience in and outside the firm, their intuition, and their passion for helping the firm succeed. We operated seamlessly in a crisis situation, with team members moving in and out of my office all day long to provide updates and suggestions before reconvening with other members of their departments to execute on the next step of the plan. We all trusted each other to deliver what we promised, and to be honest in providing feedback about what would work and where we saw challenges. As a result, we were able to transition the firm using a clear, firm-wide strategy and openly share what to expect with our firm members.

Like our peers and corporations around the world, we now face a re-evaluation of commercial real estate needs, an assessment of our expense posture, and impact analysis on client pricing. As uncertain as these

times are, it's exciting to consider how operations, talent retention, and technology will evolve. We have already discovered new ways to more efficiently and effectively serve our clients using technology, which is an opportunity we can't pass up. Moving to an all-digital proforma management system has been one of the most impactful implementations this year and helps ensure timely, accurate invoices. Other changes in finance and accounting like payment portals or electronic-payment policies enable more professional staff to remain productive outside of the office. Our team expects the disruptions caused by COVID-19 to reverberate long after the pandemic crisis passes, and so we continue to seek out new, long-term solutions. We exist to serve clients, so have remained laser focused on cutting through the pain and economic shockwaves we are experiencing to create value for our clients.

In early March, our Chief Strategy and Marketing Officer focused our teams on providing valuable guidance and resources to our clients through the firm's website. With general counsel and business owners inundated with emails and news reports, we worked diligently to organize resources on our website and ensure the highest search-engine ranking so clients could find answers quickly. For example, a focus of our content curation included information for retail tenants asserting lease rights when stores were closed, and insurance coverage and antitrust considerations related to the pandemic. We also created an internal work product sharing site for our lawyers to find answers other attorneys at the firm had provided to other similarly situated clients. This

allowed us to respond to client questions as quickly and as cost-effectively as possible.

More information than ever before is available publicly. Online databases, such as the one created by Stanford Law School for COVID-19, and external intelligence and technology solutions have made knowledge sharing more efficient and powerful. This will make it challenging for law firms to differentiate themselves through work product alone. As a result, we believe our firm's historic and continued dedication to developing the next generation of trial lawyers and leaders will be our strongest differentiator in the future.

I want to close with my reinforced conviction that the most valuable currency in our team, and in our relationships with clients, is trust. Our diverse group of leaders solves problems and leads through challenges by bringing to bear their disparate views, experiences, strategies, and priorities. It's magical to see the respect for each viewpoint, and then consensus and solidification of action plans through iterative improvement. This solidarity is only possible through the trust we have for each other. Likewise, the success of the firm and the solutions we've been able to achieve with our clients in the wake of COVID-19 are the result of the endurance of client relationships forged long before 2020. This confidence, belief, and trust had to come quickly for members of the Olympic Dream Team and couldn't be forged in the big game. In legal services and in any relationship, it must be earned, often through time and taking action.