

Alumni Interview: Julie Xu (2011-2016)

By Nicholas Weisman



Julie Xu is General Counsel and Corporate Secretary at Wag! and a member of its executive team. She is responsible for overseeing all legal matters at Wag!, including corporate transactions, litigation, corporate governance, and regulatory issues. Julie supervises the internal legal team as well as outside counsel. Prior to joining Wag!, Julie served as Associate General Counsel at Eaze and Corporate Counsel at Uber. Julie was an associate at Cleary from 2011-2016 in the New York office.

What practice areas did you work in while at Cleary?

I was in corporate generally. I did some work in the private equity, M&A, IP, and capital markets groups, but when I left Cleary, I worked in the leverage finance group. I mainly worked with Duane McLaughlin at the end but have had the pleasure of working with all of the leverage finance partners and various other corporate partners.

And how did you enjoy your time at Cleary?

I could not have gotten luckier going to Cleary! The recession happened when I was a first-year and a summer associate, so it was difficult for everybody to find a job, and I felt very lucky to be hired. It turned out to be the perfect place for me. I just love all the people; I think they're the best part. Cleary has always been known to be the quirky and fun firm where everyone is nice and collegial.

Do you work in an office with an open-concept plan?

Yes, it's pretty consistent throughout the tech companies in Silicon Valley. I still remember the experience of going from Cleary's individual offices to the open office. It was jarring at first, but now I think it's really fun and I love it. When I was sitting in my own office and needed to call someone to ask a question, I would think, "Now I draft an email or put in a call." Now I can just turn to a team member or a stakeholder in the company. Well – not currently because of COVID – but generally it's super convenient. It feels much more collaborative. You can work more as a team, and people can ask more questions. Also, I know that Cleary recently got Zoom, but Silicon Valley has been using Zoom for years. When I left Cleary to go to Uber, I got to use Zoom to videoconference with all our offices in Europe or in Asia. So I actually get to see people's faces. When I was at Cleary it was much less typical to see a client face to face, since most of the time we teleconferenced.

Are you from California?

I'm actually from Charleston, South Carolina, and I grew up in the South. I try to say "y'all" on purpose to work in my Southern roots.

You mentioned you worked for Uber, what else did you do between Cleary and Wag!?

Usually people do this thing called the "two-step." Since a New York corporate firm experience is quite different from a Silicon Valley law firm, you typically transfer to a Silicon Valley firm before you go in-house. But I was quite fortunate that I got to go straight from Cleary to an in-house position. I always knew that I wanted to work in-house and be in the tech sector. So, I went directly from Cleary to Uber to be corporate counsel, which was a really interesting experience because I got to work on many different deals. After that I went to a smaller start-up called Eaze, which is a technology company that facilitates marijuana delivery. After Eaze, I moved to Wag!

And what does Wag! do?

Wag! is a technology platform – an app and a website – that connects pet owners, specifically dog owners, to a network of pet care providers who provide on-demand walking, boarding, sitting, and training. During COVID, we've launched a virtual Q&A with veterinarians and digital pet training. We're in 4,600 cities in all 50 states, and we have over 150,000 pet care providers on the platform. So it's very interesting to manage a nationwide platform.

That's sounds like a great platform, and maybe some of the Cleargolaw readers will read about this and sign up. What is the typical day for you, if there is a typical day at Wag!?

I think every day does vary, since we're doing a million projects at once. The company moves very quickly, and my department and I have to be scrappy. As part of the senior leadership team, the majority of my time is spent discussing things with the executive and leadership teams and with the business stakeholders. Being a lawyer in-house, the most fun and challenging part is not necessarily being an expert on the law. As you know, we can engage outside counsel for that. But as an in-house lawyer, you're the person who understands the business and its risk profile the best. You're the one who is the

protector and gatekeeper of the company. You actually get to be involved in all of these critical business strategy decisions, and be a true partner to the business. So thinking outside of the box and how to move the business forward both from a legal and a business perspective is one of the most interesting and fun parts of the job. I work with many excellent outside counsels, but all outside counsels will come to you and ask you, "Where do you want to go with this provision, or this indemnity or liability, where do you want to go in terms of risk profile?" They can't make those decisions, so it's up to you to make those decisions.

That sounds great, what do you think is the best skillset Cleary taught you that you use in your current practice?

First, Cleary taught me how to be a good lawyer, and I couldn't have been trained in a better environment. I think it was not only the type of work I got to do, but also just watching and learning from the best lawyers in the world. Not just from a legal perspective, but also how they interacted with clients, how they managed their teams, and how they thought strategically as business partners. That was very important and something I really appreciated. Also I learned the soft skills. I touch on that when I say managing clients and interacting with them. By the end when I was a mid-level 5th year associate, I understood how to manage teams and do very complicated deals. When you go in-house, you have to be agile and flexible, because you won't know every single skillset or every type of law, but you need to be able to identify all the issues and then help solve them. Often you have to be extremely creative with your legal solutions, and many times I've worked with my business team to come up with solutions that outside counsels wouldn't have thought of. So it's important to know what experts we need to hire, what we need to think about, and how we should approach an issue going forward. What I learned at Cleary is how to actually do this and how to think strategically and analytically about these things. But my biggest gain from Cleary is the network. There are partners I still speak to who I consider to be my mentors, and that is an amazing network to have. Even during COVID, I have been talking to many partners at Cleary and asking them for advice. There's always someone you can look to, and you can always be a better lawyer.

Right, and as you were saying before, we are a very collegial and congenial firm, so that helps.

Absolutely! Every time Cleary people come to Silicon Valley, I always see somebody, and I try to go to all of the alumni events. I've seen Duane McLaughlin a few times, SK Kang a few times. It's amazing to be able to see everyone who comes out here. They are both outstanding lawyers and people I respect, and that's Cleary's biggest asset.

Was there an experience outside of Cleary that was really valuable to develop this skillset?

Over my career, the different experiences I've had at the various tech companies I've worked at have really helped me grow as a lawyer, a business stakeholder, and a thinker. I was corporate counsel at Uber, so I didn't have the same responsibilities I do now, when I'm on the executive team and speak directly to the board. So seeing yourself grow as a lawyer and business partner is something that you can try to learn from talking to people, but the best way to learn it is by doing it. At first, you may falter, but as you keep going you gain greater competence by doing it. Even my attitude in the boardroom has changed from when I first started; I've improved, and I hope I continue to grow better through experience. Also, one of the most challenging parts is working with different teams or different companies and adapting to their varying dynamics. How do you make sure your CEO views you as a partner rather than a roadblock, and how do you manage that relationship? How do you manage your board and make sure they trust you as a lawyer? Those soft skills are harder to learn than how to be a great lawyer.

And they don't train you for that in law school.

Exactly! I feel like at Cleary, not only are they really competent lawyers, but they have amazing soft skills. Watching them manage their teams and their clients, you try to emulate these people that are your legal role models.

What drew you to tech specifically?

I always thought that tech was propelling the entire world as an industry, and it was also innovating the law, and I wanted to be a part of that. For example, Uber was changing how we thought about taxi cabs, and it

was going into all these various cities and challenging the regulations. Tech was trying to push the boundaries on not just the economy but also the law. As a lawyer I thought that was really fun, and I wanted to be a part of that. So that's what drew me to tech, and I've loved it ever since.

No regrets about moving to Silicon Valley?

No, I love California, and who doesn't love puppies! At Wag!, I get to play with coworkers' puppies, and I've even become the office "puppy trainer." And Silicon Valley is very different. When I first worked in-house, I wore my Cleary pencil-skirts and people commented: "Why do you look so corporate?" So now I dress down for work.

What advice would you give a young associate who wants to follow your career path?

My first piece of advice would be to meet as many people as possible. When I was a summer associate I tried to go to every Cleary event. The network and the people you meet at Cleary is something you carry with you for the rest of your life, not just as colleagues but also as mentors and friends. Try not to take the Cleary experience for granted in terms of meeting people and learning from them. If you want to go in-house, think about what area you want to go into. I did leverage finance, but I also dabbled in a variety of corporate groups when I started, which was definitely helpful. Also, try to really engage with your clients in an open dialogue. Think about if you were in-house with the client, what that would look like, and try to approach deals that way. Try to examine things from the business perspective. If you were drafting a document and ask the client for feedback, when they provide their input consider why they answered that way. Those kinds of things are useful, because you're already challenging yourself to be in the mindset of thinking from an in-house perspective and being a business partner and a stakeholder.

What advice do you wish you had gotten as a young associate?

Today, I specialize in being a generalist. My role is to do everything, including regulatory, compliance, litigation, privacy, data security, corporate, commercial. So to

anybody who's thinking of going in-house, Cleary is a great place to be because you don't have to specialize from the very beginning. Encouraging associates, which is what Cleary did, to dabble in multiple areas was really illuminating for me. It's not necessarily about learning the specific area, it's about being agile enough to understand what an M&A deal looks like, what a high-yield debt offering looks like, what an IP deal looks like. How are they similar, how are they different, and why? What kind of issues do they look for, how do they think about the various issues, how do they resolve these issues, and how do they interact with clients? If you want to be an effective in-house lawyer, it's about being able to think like a business stakeholder but also being able to ask the right questions. I always say my main job is to ask the right questions, and it's hard to do that when you specialize from the very beginning. I know that there's a general push to specialize early, but you learn a lot by going to different groups. You learn what you don't know, and that's definitely as valuable as learning what you do know.