

Littler Helps Diverse Attorneys Find Mentors With SOAR Program

By **Kevin Penton**

Law360 (May 11, 2022, 3:24 PM EDT) -- Navigating the first few months at a law firm can be arduous for any young associate. For those of diverse backgrounds, one additional challenge can be making connections and advancing in a place where there may be few individuals of similar backgrounds.

Littler Mendelson PC attempts to help young diverse attorneys bridge that gap through the SOAR program, which connects them with experienced attorneys at the firm who can provide guidance on how to thrive at a worldwide firm that features more than 1,000 lawyers in the United States alone and more than 1,600 attorneys overall.

Law360 recently spoke with Littler shareholders Michelle Gomez and Joon Hwang, who serve as SOAR's co-chairs. They head the 18-month program — begun in 2017 as Investment for Success — that in the fall saw 15 attorneys graduate.

The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

What do you hope young attorneys get from participating in the SOAR program?

Hwang: The first few months at a firm can be crucial in determining an attorney's success. So with that in mind, the SOAR program is designed to connect diverse attorneys who are hired with an experienced attorney at the firm. The purpose of the program is to help them find their footing at the firm, so they can excel and achieve their goals at Littler. Obviously Littler is a big firm, there are a lot of different opportunities. We hope the mentor will provide guidance in navigating through all the different resources and opportunities that are available at Littler.

Tell me more about how you decide to pair mentors and mentees in the program.

Hwang: We try to match the mentors and the mentees together if they are in the same affinity group, or if we feel that they have certain experiences that we feel that they can relate with. For example, if we see a new attorney mentee have a government background, then we may try to match them up with an attorney mentor who may have had the same experience or background when they joined the firm. That way they can relate and talk about similar topics.



Michelle Gomez



Joon Hwang

Gomez: Another goal of ours is to pair them to the extent possible with a mentor outside their office. That creates a mentor/mentee relationship where they can be more forthcoming and perhaps ask questions or raise issues that they perhaps might not be comfortable raising in their own home office.

There has been concern that the pandemic and remote work may have hampered younger attorneys in making connections at their firms and receiving the training they need as they start their careers, whether formal or informal. How did this impact SOAR?

Hwang: With the SOAR program, because we're matching up attorneys from different areas of the country, oftentimes if someone is matched with a bit of distance, they may not be able to meet in person all the time. But with the pandemic and with the advent of virtual platforms such as Zoom, it's really worked well. In the pandemic, virtual reality has really become the norm, so we've found that our participants really enjoy a virtual lunch together. They may jump on a call and talk about the various issues or topics that may be on the mentee's mind or even on the mentor's mind.

Did either of you benefit from mentorships earlier in your career? Was it as part of a formal program such as SOAR, or did you more informally connect with more senior attorneys?

Gomez: When I came to Littler it was more of an informal basis, as SOAR's precursor did not start until 2017. But I was really lucky to be invited to join the Career Advocacy Program at Littler. That was such a fantastic opportunity. That program pairs mid- and senior-level associates with leaders and rainmakers within Littler. That was an incredible mentoring opportunity for me. I think that's the reason why I was so excited to become a part of SOAR and become co-chair with Joon, because I realized how important it is to establish those relationships early on in your career. It's just exciting to be around people who are like-minded, who are very driven, and who show you what's actually possible at a firm like Littler.

Hwang: My experience is very similar to Michelle. When I joined the firm back in 2012, I was a very junior associate. I didn't really know much about labor and employment. Littler gave me an opportunity to start my career after a federal clerkship that ended in North Carolina. Throughout the process I've had a lot of opportunities for informal mentorships with various attorneys at the firm that I still consider mentors, even now as a shareholder.

Tell me about some goals and initiatives you would like to see for the program over the next year or so.

Gomez: One of the things we're most interested in doing over the course of the next year is identifying ambassadors — specifically Littler alum — who can be very closely connected to SOAR, whether it's talking on panels or providing additional mentoring opportunities. We're looking forward to partnering not only with Littler shareholders, but with Littler alum and in-house counsel who may want to serve as ambassadors to this program.

Hwang: Michelle and I are always throwing out different ideas and initiatives to help our newly hired diverse talent who are our mentees. As an immediate goal, we're looking to get more of our alums involved and really develop more of the panels that we think are very helpful to attorneys at all levels. Ultimately we're looking to provide any type of support that these diverse attorneys may need as they navigate their careers at Littler.