

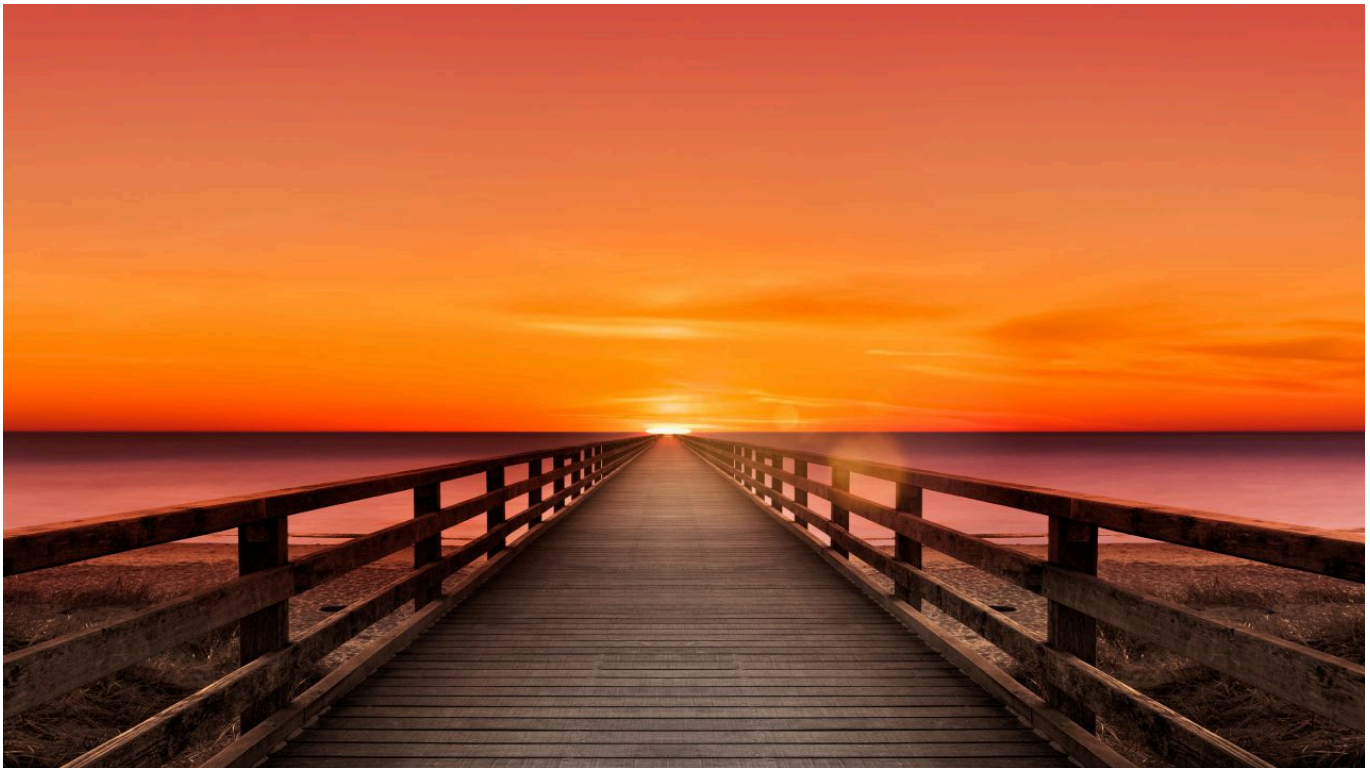
# Succession Planning at Holland & Knight's LGBTQ Affinity Group

[Dianne R Phillips](#)

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## Summary

- Holland & Knight's LGBTQ Affinity Group has empowered new co-leaders to continue fostering a supportive community for LGBTQ professionals.
- The affinity group's notable achievements include pioneering domestic partner benefits, offering transgender-inclusive healthcare policies, and earning top scores on the Corporate Equality Index.
- A structured succession plan involved shadowing current leaders, detailed transition documentation, and ongoing support to ensure continuity.



***The views expressed in this article are the personal views of the author and are not official policy positions of the American Bar Association.***

Succession planning is an important aspect of any organization's growth, future, and success. Our firm's LGBTQ Affinity Group recently successfully transitioned from co-leaders who had led the affinity group for over 20 years to new co-leaders.

[Holland & Knight's LGBTQ Affinity Group](#) is one of the firm's oldest affinity groups, beginning as an unofficial grassroots working group over 20 years ago before it became a firm-recognized affinity group in 2005. Over the last two decades as the affinity group's inaugural co-chairs, Michael Manthei and I worked tirelessly and strategically to create and foster a space — and eventually a community — at Holland & Knight for lawyers who self-identify as LGBTQ to be supported and thrive. We took actions, starting with building an informal framework, to provide our LGBTQ colleagues with a safe space to be open and share their perceived challenges in the workplace, as well as what the firm could do to better support them.

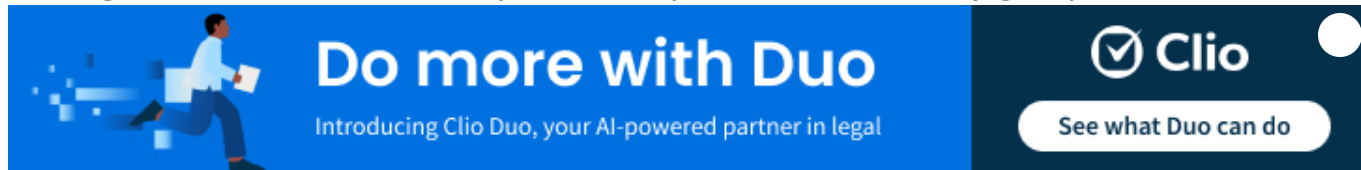
Some of the affinity group's most notable successes include:

- ❑ The firm was one of the first to offer domestic partner benefits and has done so since the 1990s.
- ❑ We offered transition-related health care coverage beginning in 2014, and in 2019, we adopted a protocol regarding the provision of information, resources, and support to transgender employees — making us one of the first Big Law firms to embrace full transgender inclusion.
- ❑ Several years ago, we established a policy permitting employees to include pronouns in their email signature blocks and attorney biographies.
- ❑ Most recently, we have expanded the identification options available on Workday to make the interface more inclusive of all current and future Holland & Knight employees, including, for example, the opportunity for employees to self-identify as nonbinary.

The result has been years of perfect, or near-perfect, scores on the [Human Rights Campaign Foundation's Corporate Equality Index](#).

About three years ago, I began voicing that it was about time to turn over the reins to new leadership. Our ranks had grown from just a dozen or so partners in the beginning to more than 60 professionals at every level of practice, many with very different lived experiences than my own. A personal leadership motto of mine has always been "to

empower and thank” — expressing my goal to empower others to carry the torch and then thank them for their efforts and leadership. As a result, we began more intentionally leaning into this motto to develop a slate of potential new affinity group leaders.



Instead of personally leading the planning and decision-making regarding our annual programming and initiatives, we began intentionally and strategically asking for volunteers, for example, to lead our Pride Month Committee. We began more consistently asking the affinity group members for their thoughts for upcoming social and educational programming, and then let those who raised their hands run with the presented opportunities. These “dry runs” served as a means for us to develop a robust list of who we had in the leadership pipeline — comprised of those most interested, active, and effective at execution.

After receiving firm leadership’s approval of our proposed incoming affinity group leaders, we began having them shadow our leadership routine to develop an understanding of our key (and ancillary) responsibilities, develop relationships with key stakeholders, and begin weighing in on our discussions and decisions. These shadowing efforts included copying them or forwarding them pertinent emails and having them join Diversity Council meetings (which are otherwise closed to individuals not on the council). This also included having them begin taking the lead, with the benefit of co-chair guidance and support, of annual efforts, like our firm’s participation in the LGBTQ+ Bar Association’s Lavender Law Conference and Career Fair, Pride Month planning, and preparation for our participation on the Human Rights Campaign Foundation’s Corporate Equality Index.

I also prepared a very detailed transition memo outlining the LGBTQ affinity group leaders’ core responsibilities throughout the year and the applicable contacts who will serve as resources to them. The goal of this memo is to serve as an ongoing resource for the incoming co-leaders’ use, as well as a living document that they can update and provide for future affinity group leaders. I also shared key historical emails for their additional awareness, reference, and appreciation of the actions and allies that have contributed toward making our affinity group what it is today.

Perhaps most important is that we continue to make ourselves available as an ongoing resource for any questions that they may have along the way and a sounding board if they need a gut check or someone to play devil’s advocate. We continue to leverage our institutional knowledge, experiences, and relationships to lend a hand in championing any issues that might benefit from our perspective and influence.

Recognizing that affinity group leadership is a key way for lawyers to develop leadership skills, it is important to engage associates and new partners early in these efforts. Succession planning is an important part of the process.

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