

How I Made Office Managing Partner: 'Law Is a Team Sport, You're Only as Good as Your Team,' Says Michael Hilton of Skadden

By ALM Staff

February 12, 2025

Michael Hilton, 46, Partner at Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom, ADGM, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

Job title: Head of the Abu Dhabi office and Middle East Practice

Practice area: Corporate

Law school and year of graduation: Nottingham Law School, 2000.

The following has been edited for style.

How long have you been at the firm?

Since 1 October 2024.

What year were you promoted/elected to your current role?

1 October 2024.

Were you a partner at another firm before joining your present firm? If so, which one, how long were you there, and when did you leave?

Prior to joining Skadden to launch our Abu Dhabi office and lead our Middle East Practice, I was regional managing partner for the Middle East and North Africa at Freshfields and had been a partner there since 2012. I was with the firm for over 23 years.

How would you describe your career trajectory (was it organic or an active pursuit)?



Courtesy photo

Michael Hilton of Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom.

My career trajectory has been organic. I have concentrated on doing my job to the best of my ability, and things have tended to take care of themselves. It's good to have an idea of the mountain you're trying to climb, but typically you get there by just putting one foot in front of the other. It's an ongoing process that never stops. The higher you get, the more peaks you see. The core skills remain the same; you just need to evolve and broaden them a bit. Leadership, coaching, and mentoring pervade everything you do as a lawyer from an early age, and indeed from

long before that, including at school and university—irrespective of title.

What do you think was the deciding point for the firm in electing/promoting you to your current role?

Skadden has been servicing sovereign, corporate, and institutional clients in the Middle East for decades. As the firm's client base has grown significantly in the Middle East in recent years, they wanted to enhance their capabilities by establishing a presence in the region. For me, when I saw Skadden looking to establish a presence in the region, I realized that we were entering the next stage of the evolution of the legal market here in the Middle East—similar to what has happened elsewhere in the world.

With more than 20 years of experience handling cross-border private and public M&A and joint ventures, the last decade here in the Middle East, plus an emphasis on financial sponsor work, I think I was a good fit both in terms of seniority and culturally. At the core of it all was the human element. Skadden has amazing lawyers who genuinely care about quality lawyering, and they're incredibly collegial too. When I joined, I felt an overwhelming amount of support. They have gone above and beyond to make sure I feel supported and have shown they're truly invested in my success. The energy, enthusiasm, and commitment here make it clear why finding the right cultural fit for this role was so important.

The people at the firm genuinely enjoy each other's company and are laser-focused on providing our clients with exceptional service across the platform.

What unique challenges do you face as it relates to your role?

I think it is a good challenge to have, but we have seen the quality and sophistication of transactions grow year-on-year in the region for a long time now. This has also meant that there is a significant concentration of extremely sophisticated clients who demand the highest service, both on transactions and disputes globally. Another positive challenge is building our team. We have been diligently recruiting and considering strategic moves within the firm, so we already have a high-quality team assembled in Abu Dhabi; but we will continue to grow. We want to infuse new joiners with the Skadden DNA in an accelerated timeframe while also taking the best of what they bring from elsewhere and weaving that into Skadden, to help the firm continue to evolve.

As office leader of a new office, it is critical for me to bring everyone together, foster strong relationships, establish meaningful traditions, develop efficient systems, and create a culture and an identity of our own, while also honoring and building upon the foundation laid by our firm.

What's the best piece of advice you give to someone who wants to rise up the ranks to lead an office?

Law is a team sport and you're only as good as your team. I played a lot of team sports growing up, and I was never the best player on the team. But I do feel that I have always added to the team, and it's been better as a result of me being on it. Being a leader isn't about being the best lawyer; it's about helping

the team to be the best. Different people bring different things to the team, and whatever your job title, your job is to facilitate that. So, invest in the people around you. Earn their trust and give them yours willingly. Make sure they understand that if they lose it, it's gone. Be a fountain, not a drain.

Another piece of advice is to remember that we all serve at the pleasure of our clients. They want you to give views, offer perspectives, and act as a genuine sounding board and thinking partner—but it's important to never let your ego lead you to believe that you are anyone other than someone who works for and with them. You are not the main act; they are. Without them, you don't have a business.

Who had the greatest influence in your career that helped propel you to your current role?

There are a few—and I wouldn't want to single out any one above the others. My father was a lawyer, so I saw first-hand what it takes to succeed—I learned my work ethic from him. Seeing him help build Eversheds when it first came together had a significant impact on me. I find a lot of satisfaction in building teams and businesses, and the challenge of doing that again—breaking new ground—was a big driver in my move to Skadden.

Another example from my early days is Martin Taylor, a now-retired M&A partner at my former firm. Martin was a very effective lawyer; clients wanted him in their corner. But where he was truly great was at the business of law—he was way ahead of his time. Martin was a hard man, but a fair one, and incredibly loyal. I like to think

that I learned a lot from him, including how the legal world and law firms work.

But I always keep looking for more people to learn from. Happily, there are a number here at Skadden. Three months in, I can tell you already that if you ask me the same question in 10 years' time, Mike Leiter, who serves as head of the firm's CFIUS and National Security Practices, will likely also be on the list. First and foremost, Mike adds huge value to any situation. That's through a combination of knowledge, judgment, and EQ. He's really impressive to see and learn from. But beyond that, he's a great guy—confident and assured. That's an example for all of us to learn from.

How do you utilize technology to benefit the firm/practice and/or business development?

I love tech and I am an early adopter. My team went pretty much paperless five years ago, at the start of the pandemic, and learned to operate really effectively in the virtual world using cloud-based solutions. So you have to keep an open mind, and keep testing what is and isn't making a real difference. Take AI, for example; it's evolving all the time, and we keep leaning into it. Staying open to innovation and continuously testing it, helps ensure that we are always moving forward and adapting to the ever-evolving technological landscape.

Knowing what you know now, what advice would you give to your younger self and/or what would you do differently?

It's tricky, as I wouldn't know what I know now if I hadn't done what I've done. But I'd probably tell myself to relax a little; it's going to be okay. Perfectionism is fine, but only to a point.

Do you have a prediction on how the legal industry will evolve over the next several years?

People say that tech will make lawyers redundant, but I see more and more of my friends' children wanting to be lawyers. In practice, I suspect it will be a continued evolution rather than a revolution. Younger lawyers need to be able to use tech, but they also need to be able to develop excellent judgment, sitting on top of the black-letter answer. I think there will be a continued trend towards the apprenticeship model. Clients want partners to do the work alongside their team, not above their team. So, a leaner pyramid than when I first started.

Please share with us any firm or industry initiatives that you are working on as well as the impact you hope to achieve.

I am focusing on establishing our offerings in Abu Dhabi and ensuring we grow with the highest quality talent to support delivering the whole firm—'one Skadden'; meaning that clients get the same quality and depth of experience that is synonymous with Skadden

across the US, Europe, and Asia, whether they are investing from, into, or across the region.

What career advice do you wish more people would ask you?

I actually think that I get asked pretty good questions by our people all the time. They're smart, and invariably I learn as much from them as the other way around, if not more. You need to always be a sponge. One thing I would say is that people need to be themselves, within reason. It's okay to show your authentic self to your people and your clients. In fact, to build deep relationships you need to be able to do that.

As a law firm leader, what impact would you like to have on your firm and/or the legal industry as a whole?

I have pretty modest ambitions; I'm not setting out to have an impact on the entire legal industry. I concentrate on the small stuff, building my team, joining up with others from across the firm, and doing great work for great clients. In my experience, the big stuff then tends to take care of itself.