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2012 Top 10 30-Something: Alison Burton

Interviews and Profiles





Senior Counsel

Royal Bank of Canada

Age: 38

Proudest Achievement: “The pro bono work that we do at RBC.”

Taking the bird’s eye view

In 2009, after two years at Royal Bank of Canada, Alison Burton was tasked with re-staffing and managing RBC’s Canadian Employment and Disability Dispute Resolution team. In tackling the challenge, she tried to make diversity of style, views and thought a priority. “It’s hard to hire people who think differently than you,” she says. “But having different perspectives is really helpful — it challenges you.” The result is a dream team: Each team member contributes with his or her strengths. Burton also says she tries to empower the others by being hands-off, something she wants to get better at doing. “If you give your people ownership of a project, they’re more likely to run with it and care about it more,” she says.

Stepping back and monitoring the big picture makes Burton a successful project manager, too. She pioneered a Lean Six Sigma initiative in her group. Initially, people were skeptical. “Once a third-party provider was in the room with us, outside counsel and our team really heard each other,” says Burton. “Now, we all agree that we communicate better through this process, and that one-size-fits-all legal advice doesn’t work for all law departments.”

Burton also uses her bird’s eye when anticipating litigation trends. “If you are retaining external counsel, they should run the file,” she says. “As lawyers, we tend to be detail-oriented, but as in-house counsel, we have to take a 30,000-foot view of what our portfolio looks like. When you do, you’ll start to see trends, and they’re not always what you’d expect them to be.” Knowing the trends makes Burton good at envisioning reputational risk, and mitigating it. “To identify reputational risk, you have to understand your brand and what matters to your enterprise,” she says. “RBC is the biggest bank in Canada, so we talk a lot about our brand and core values.”

RBC takes social responsibility very seriously. As such, RBC Law group has supported an extensive pro bono program. Burton is the Chair of RBC’s Pro Bono Committee. Recently, Burton represented eight people who could not afford lawyers in litigation cases ranging from car theft to landlord

disagreements, as part of RBC's Small Claims Duty Counsel Project, which many RBC lawyers participate in. "It makes you realize how hard it is for people who don't have the means to navigate through our system," she says. "It's not an easy one."

Burton and the Committee also work with cancer survivors who are returning to the workforce, and having difficulty with insurers or employers, through a program called Money Matters. Another program called Unaccompanied Minors sets up RBC's volunteers with minors who land in Canada without many options. These are just a few of RBC's many notable pro bono projects.

When asked how she gets it all done, Burton says she feels supported by RBC. The demands on in-house lawyers can be far-reaching. "It's a challenge for me, because I think all lawyers want to help, but I've learned from my managers to think about whether something is really a legal question, or someone just wants a lawyer to answer it," she says. "There are tons of smart professionals in this institution, and we don't have to take it all on. That's what I'm learning. It's hard, but I think I'll get there."

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