



Innovation Meets Business: How Aon's Darren Zeidel Embraces Today's Challenges

Interviews and Profiles



When Darren Zeidel completed law school at McGill University in Quebec, he knew he had a passion to participate in some of the most significant opportunities the corporate legal profession could offer. Fast forward to July 2019, when he stepped into his current position at Aon plc following several

other impressive roles, and it would appear his younger self steered him well.

He now serves as executive vice president, general counsel, and company secretary of Aon, a global professional services firm of more than 50,000 employees in 120 countries with an annual revenue of US\$11 billion. Aon helps clients manage complex problems in the areas of risk, retirement, and health, providing data-driven insights to enhance the performance of their organizations.

A seat at the table



"I've always wanted to be very close to the business side of a company, along with being responsible for the legal aspects as well," says Zeidel, who is based in Aon's Chicago office and manages nearly a 400-member law, compliance, and public affairs team in 37 countries. "To merge the two means demonstrating the value proposition of our team's global function while working alongside our business partners in the company to drive growth, innovation, and a strong culture of compliance."

Aon's business has come to welcome and expect its law and compliance colleagues to have a [seat at the table](#). Zeidel's team engages its legal and business acumen in a variety of activities. This includes creating playbooks and conducting training that enhances compliance, enables new product development initiatives and furthers E&O prevention efforts. It also means updating contract templates and developing negotiation strategies to ensure market competitiveness and drive growth.

"Designing an innovative product in the professional services industry will pay dividends for our clients if it is done in partnership with a law and compliance team that not only understands applicable laws and regulations but also knows its business inside and out — and that is the model Aon is driving," Zeidel adds.

Through it all, it's important to Zeidel that in-house counsel is motivated to drive business outcomes while also protecting the franchise. "We cannot be passive observers," he elaborates. "We must leverage our seat at the table to add value every day."

Modernizing the paradigm

As a global corporation, Aon has law and compliance teams strategically located around the world. More than anything, their ability to connect and collaborate in today's global economy is the key to their success and involves supporting Aon in driving growth, innovation, and productivity while working to become more efficient.

"To help drive growth, we provide support and counsel from within the regions while also ensuring regional teams have access to global subject matter expertise to help solve the most complex challenges facing our business" Zeidel says. "We have terrific capabilities within our global team, so it's important that we make it easy to harness those capabilities, whenever and wherever necessary, to deliver the best results for our business."

This approach is at the heart of *Aon United*, Aon's broadscale initiative to accelerate alignment and momentum around its growth strategy, bringing the best of Aon to clients and driving sustainable growth of the firm.

For Zeidel's team, *Aon United* means providing high-quality support to business clients in the most effective and efficient way possible. By delivering expert advice and support to local leaders, while collaborating globally across solution lines to drive growth and mitigate risk, the law and compliance team can ensure a better experience for colleagues and clients.

To drive innovation, Aon responds proactively to client challenges in an increasingly complex world by bringing the full force of its firm to them when developing solutions, while also applying data and analytics to better inform and advise them for their future.

"Our lawyers and compliance professionals regularly work on projects that break new ground within Aon and require the team to think 'outside the box' and address issues of first impression in a way that is practical and quick but always protective of Aon as a whole," Zeidel says.

When it comes to driving productivity and working to become more efficient within the law and compliance team, this includes the strategic addition of centers of excellence in countries such as Poland and India, in which teams of lawyers and legal professionals ensure standard processes and improved efficiencies are implemented, resulting in quality work product and improved turnaround times.

"Our centers of excellence are the backbone of our organization — filled with talented, experienced professionals, they are true extensions of our onshore teams. When we place the right work with the right people in the right locations, it positions us to provide the highest levels of service to our clients."

Recognizing exceptional talent

Aon recognizes that its people drive innovation, protect its business, and deliver results. The law and compliance team is no exception.

“We have been a leader in *Aon United’s* colleague mission called ‘Aon Impact Model,’ which articulates the impact each colleague can achieve by fulfilling expectations and living Aon’s values,” Zeidel says. “We are committed to embodying the Aon Impact Model by uniting as a global, collaborative team and harnessing our team’s diverse talent to its fullest potential.”

A core value of the Aon Impact Model is a belief that diversity drives insight, and in turn, the best outcome for its clients. Zeidel’s global team has long attracted top-tier talent, and this can in part be attributed to its candid commitment to diversity and inclusion, ensuring that all searches for open positions include a diverse slate of candidates and that law firm partners are selected with specific reference to their diversity and inclusion agendas.

“It’s critical to attract, develop, reward, and retain top-caliber talent,” notes Zeidel, “and to do so, you have to be living the values of diversity and inclusion.”

Aon’s law and compliance teams also engage in a global rotation program in which selected colleagues travel to a host city for approximately two weeks to be fully immersed in a substantive project or program. The program gives law and compliance colleagues the opportunity to be dedicated to a significant initiative in offices located around the world and gain exposure across Aon’s solution lines and geographies.

It promotes global collaboration, knowledge sharing, and relationship building, while at the same time is a cost-effective way to complete projects without engaging external resources, ultimately building and retaining Aon IQ in-house.

“It’s a great opportunity for participating team members to collaborate, meet other colleagues, build their network and strengthen relationships — all of which comes in very handy when looked upon to solve increasingly complex, global challenges for our clients,” Zeidel explains.

A solid career start, an open book

Upon graduating from McGill University with his law degree, Zeidel opted to leave Canada and work in the New York office of Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP, which provided the biggest market with the most high-profile work. While there, he worked in mergers and acquisitions and corporate finance.

“But I always felt like the long-term plan was to really dig into and become totally immersed in a single client where you could hopefully shape a law function within an organization,” he says.

In 2003, he moved to Honeywell Aerospace in Arizona, serving as vice president and general counsel for a divisional business and then ultimately the business and general aviation strategic business segment. “I’m five or so years out of law school, and they’re giving me the opportunity to be part of a business leadership team and act as the lead lawyer supporting a billion-dollar aerospace division,” he recalls. “To me that was just too good to pass up.”

He later moved into a vice president and general counsel role at UOP LLC, a Honeywell Company, based in Chicago. He's been in-house ever since his Honeywell days.

In 2012, he joined Aon, where he held several positions, including global chief counsel for Aon Hewitt, and then, in early 2019, deputy general counsel, before moving into his current role last summer.

"I recognized Aon as a real thought leader in a number of critical areas that impact people's lives on a global basis, from retirement planning to health care," says Zeidel of his move from Honeywell. "I believed Aon would be an exciting environment, and that has turned out to be very true."

In-house perspective

Zeidel went in-house when perspectives about the profession were evolving. He cites Ben Heineman, the longtime general counsel of General Electric under CEO Jack Welch, as someone who elevated the in-house practice to the top of the legal pyramid. "There is ample evidence that people are going in-house because they see it as an opportunity to thrive as a lawyer," he points out.

Zeidel, long adept at leaving his comfort zone to take on new challenges — and embracing change as an opportunity to reach new heights — might be a harbinger of what's to come for the profession.

Getting to know... Darren Zeidel



Darren

Zeidel enjoying the great outdoors with his family.

What does work/life balance mean to you?

It's a big priority for me. It's not to be confused with checking in at 9 am and going home at 5 pm. People come to Aon because they are serious professionals. We're very flexible around working remotely and giving people optionality around how to get their job done. Our culture is that combination of being hardworking but respectful and realistic at the same time.

When you're not working, do you have any hobbies or passions that you pursue?

I've always loved mountain biking, which admittedly has been difficult to keep with while living in Illinois. I love off-the-grid travel and am a huge sports fan. I have a great family with kids ages 12 and 14. I'm trying to make the most of these years and give it 150 percent at work, but then do the same when I'm with them.

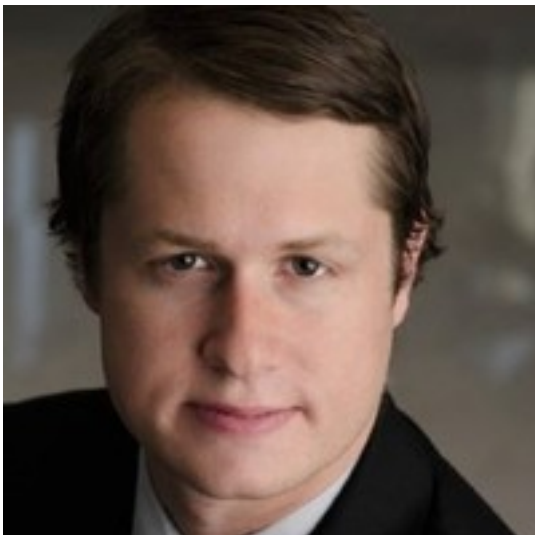
What do you mean by off-the-grid traveler?

For me it means getting outdoors and exploring places that are hard to get to, like mountain biking in the remote mountains of Cambodia, or moving my way via RV across the island Tasmania, or trekking in Patagonia.

Do you have advice for an in-house counsel who is just starting their career?

It's not necessarily enough to come in and do solid work every day. You can't keep your head down and assume that the system will pick up on that. I am not suggesting you should become arrogant or obsessed with self-promotion, but you really need to be thinking about your career. You always have to think about how to expand your toolkit, grow in your role, build your network, and position yourself for the next move. That's not arrogance — that's good career planning.

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