

# How I Made Office Managing Partner: 'Trust the Journey,' Says Lisa Kathumbi of Littler Mendelson

By ALM Staff

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**Lisa Kathumbi, 44, Littler, Columbus, Ohio**

**Job title:** Office Managing Shareholder of Littler's Columbus, Ohio and Lexington, Kentucky offices

**Practice areas:** Discrimination and Harassment; Leaves of Absence and Disability Accommodation; Hiring, Performance Management and Termination; ERISA and Benefit Plan Litigation; Investigations

**Law school and year of graduation:** University of Cincinnati College of Law, 2006

**How long have you been at the firm?** From 2013-2017 and April 2021-present

**What year were you promoted/elected to your current role?** 2023

**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?** After having been with Littler for almost four years, I joined Ohio firm Bricker & Eckler as a partner and was there from 2017 until early 2021, when I returned to Littler.

**How would you describe your career trajectory (was it organic or an active pursuit)?** My father told me I'd be a good lawyer from a young age and I've been actively pursuing a legal career ever since. I entered college as a pre-law student and was fortunate to connect with a great program—Summer Work Experience in Law (SWEL)—that really solidified my interest in the legal profession and gave me access to a strong, early network of attorneys long before I started law school.

As part of the program, I worked for the late legal giant, the Honorable Nathaniel R. Jones, who was on the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals. I enjoyed the program so much that I participated in SWEL for a second summer, where I had the unique experience of working abroad for a Women's Legal Information Center in Botswana. During my last summer before graduating, I snagged a coveted spot as a SWEL student coordinator—so I got to know a lot of the law firms and employers.

**What do you think was the deciding point for the firm in electing/promoting you to your current role? Was it your performance on a specific case? A personality trait?**

**Making connections with the right people?** I believe I was chosen as an OMS for the Columbus and Lexington offices because my goals are aligned with those of the firm and our attorneys: to provide first-rate client service while engaging in and serving our local communities.

As OMS, I hope to leverage my relationships in the regions' legal and business communities to build upon the strong foundation that Littler attorneys have established in these markets. We have amazing talent in Columbus and Lexington, and I look forward to collaborating with both teams as we continue to showcase what makes Littler special – including our geographic footprint, diverse workforce, subject matter expertise, experience with complex litigation, expansive resources and innovative legal solutions.

**What unique challenges do you face as it relates to your role?** Retaining a productive, diverse, satisfied and engaged workforce is always a focus and a priority.

We spend a lot of time advising clients on this, as well as navigating it ourselves. People want flexibility and increased control over the direction of their career. Finding unique ways to respond to that shift in expectations is challenging, especially considering the client-centered service model our profession often demands. This is an issue that all employers are facing, but I think it requires even more creativity and evolution from the traditional thinking in the legal profession.

**What's the best piece of advice you give to someone who wants to rise up the ranks to lead an office?** I have three pieces of advice:

1. Learn your craft. Become a strong practitioner.
2. Build authentic relationships and a diverse network—then nurture those relationships.
3. Invest in leadership opportunities throughout your career. Become a student of leadership by utilizing



**Lisa Kathumbi,  
Littler Mendelson.**

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the programs and opportunities available both inside and outside your organization. For example, I participated in the Leadership Council on Legal Diversity's fellowship program and served on the board of the Ohio Women's Bar Association (OWBA) for many years before becoming the first black president to lead the organization. Both were powerful personal and professional development opportunities that helped prepare me for my current role.

**Who had the greatest influence in your career that helped propel you to your current role? Please provide name, job title and a brief explanation.** I'm fortunate to have a long list of people who have supported me, starting with my parents. They came to the U.S. on their own from Nairobi, Kenya as college students. They taught me to value education and demonstrated a relentless work ethic for me and my siblings.

As an undergrad, SWEL and its founder, Jim Johnson—who's 77 years young and still running the program on a volunteer basis—gave me access to a professional network and the opportunity to see highly successful Black lawyers and judges early in my career, which was transformative.

I also had countless mentors and sponsors who championed my career once I finished law school: Jeffery B. Jones, a shareholder at Littler; Marilyn McClure Demers at Nationwide Mutual Insurance Co., who gave me opportunities that were way beyond my years; and Yvette McGee Brown, a partner at Jones Day. They not only provided me with guidance and support but were also willing to spend political capital on me, which I never took for granted.

**How do you utilize technology to benefit the firm/practice and/or business development?** Littler's approach to innovation and technology is one of the key differentiators that drew me back to the firm. We invest in developing leading IT, data analytics and application development teams in-house to meet the needs of our clients. Littler is forging the future of intelligent analytics in labor and employment law and is always looking around the corner to see how we can innovate for our clients.

**Knowing what you know now, what advice would you give to your younger self and/or what would you do differently?** I would tell my younger self to look for opportunities for growth, but don't be too anxious about the next role or title. There's a lot of learning that can come out of each moment, so trust the journey.

**Do you have a prediction on how the legal industry will evolve over the next several years?** Artificial intelligence is rapidly reshaping workplaces and the legal



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profession. Law firms that can effectively leverage AI tools to be more productive will get ahead while others may be left behind.

Littler has built a decades-long track record of successfully predicting employment trends and staying one step ahead of cutting-edge workplace changes. New AI tools, the shift to remote work, and technology-induced displacement of employees (TIDE™) are just a few of the transformational challenges that we are addressing through thought leadership and model policies.

**Please share with us any firm or industry initiatives that you are working on as well as the impact you hope to achieve.** Littler has such a tremendous global platform and infrastructure, but from a local perspective my priorities center around connectivity—internal team engagement and retention and external community engagement and service.

One of the initiatives already in the works internally is our lunch-and-learn series on various legal topics, which serves two purposes: to enhance substantive knowledge and strengthen relationships, both of which we know are tied to retention.

Externally, we're increasing our impact through strategic partnerships. I'm especially proud to lead our Columbus office's participation in the SWEL program, which helped set me on my legal journey. These last two summers, we've set up internships for SWEL undergrad students who spend half their time with us and the other half with Chief Judge Algenon Marbley, who sits on the federal court of the southern district of Ohio.

To further strengthen our service to the local community, we also recently participated in Pelotonia, which is a huge cancer research fundraiser for The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center – James Cancer Hospital and Solove Research Institute. Like many of my colleagues, my life has been personally impacted by the loss of a loved one to cancer. As a firm, we are proud to support groundbreaking cancer research efforts.