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Executive Insight

Retrofitting a law firm for retention

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Christian Porter, a Honolulu attorney who has specialized in Hawaii's real estate industry for over 30 years, helped develop his firm, Porter McGuire Kiakona Chow LLP, from the remains of Foley Maehara Nip & Chang.

"I am the only person that is left from that firm, which was a more traditional commercial real estate litigation company," Porter told Pacific Business News. "It has definitely changed over the years."

Alongside his partners, R. Laree McGuire, Kapono Kiakona and Bryson Chow, Porter has led the firm through a period of modernization, as the company tries to overcome an obstacle facing many law firms: retention.

"We started looking at trying to change the model to bring in the younger attorneys because the system wasn't working," Porter said. "A lot of people get burned out early on in this industry because of the long hours and heavy work load. The attorneys who choose to work with us want that work life balance, even though other firms may pay more."

Since 2011, the company has gone from just four partners to adding eight associates, which has led to a more collaborative work atmosphere with a better work culture, as well as creating a succession plan for the firm.

Porter has felt the trickle-down effects of this, and makes it a priority to enjoy time off which has led to greater job satisfaction.

He most closely works with community association boards, specializing in the areas of condominium and commercial litigation.

Did you always plan on becoming a partner in a law firm?

I never expected it, it was just a natural progression. I was going to go to the prosecutor's office but they had a hiring freeze, so I ended up in the civil area and didn't think about becoming a partner until 1991 with Foley Maehara Nip & Chang. I started connecting more and creating growth opportunities, such as getting involved with the condominium associations, and I developed the drive and passion to become a partner.



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What's the biggest challenge of your job?

Trying not to do everything, and learning how to pull back and delegate. This has become more prevalent as I have started mentoring and teaching the younger attorneys, which has allowed for more work life balance for me. Letting other people take the reins can be a challenge, but now when I go on vacation, I am much more relaxed.

What's the biggest reward of your job?

With this career, there is always something to learn, and we are always helping and giving back in some way. Our firm represents a lot of nonprofits through associations, and reducing conflict within communities can be very satisfying.

In what other ways has the business model changed?

We have created an exercise room for those who don't have the time or money to go to the gym, we have added attorney retreats, and we have started offering things outside of the office like a self-defense class. I think the biggest change has been seeing the camaraderie grow within the office, and seeing employees being interested in and supportive of each other.

What is the most important lesson you've learned in business?

How to be an active empathetic listener, and being able to identify with the client and get to the level where they are comfortable with you and can trust you.

What is next for the company?

We are growing not just in terms of hiring, but also expanding into other areas of practice — like family law or state planning — to create more diversity. Currently, 80 to 90 percent of our business is in representing condominiums and home owners, and the rest is with real estate and corporate litigation.

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