

TEXAS LAWYER

An **ALM** Publication

texaslawyer.com | January 24, 2020

Winston & Strawn Makes Houston Power Grab for Locke Lord Capital Markets Co-Chairs

BY BRENDA SAPINO JEFFREYS

As it seeks to strengthen its capital markets and M&A capabilities in Texas, Winston & Strawn has hired away the co-chairs of Locke Lord's global capital markets practice.

Eric Johnson and Michael Blankenship joined Winston & Strawn as partners in Houston on Wednesday. They represent public and private companies, as well as private equity funds and their portfolio companies, on corporate work in the oil and gas industry.

The lateral hires fit Winston & Strawn's plan to strategically grow its M&A and capital markets practice in Houston, said Douglas Atnipp, managing partner of the Houston office. Asked whether the two partners would be bringing any additional lawyers with them to Winston & Strawn, Atnipp said the firm has nothing to announce at this time.

Jimmy Vallee, another partner who recently joined that office from Paul Hastings, said the firm specifically "sought out" Johnson and Blankenship as part of that goal.

"They are among the most well-known corporate lawyers in Houston, and as Doug said, we continue to execute on the firm's strategic vision in the city," said Vallee, who joined Winston & Strawn in April 2019.

Johnson said when he and Blankenship started thinking about a move a few months ago, they looked for a firm with a solid commitment to Texas and a culture that would fit with their energy clients. Winston & Strawn was a "no-brainer," he said.

In addition to the energy deals team in Houston, Blankenship said they are also excited to work with Winston & Strawn's capital markets teams in New York and Chicago.

Johnson said about 80% of their clients are in the oil and gas industry. They include Houston companies National Oilwell Varco, Ranger Energy Services and DistributionNOW, and Oklahoma's SandRidge Energy.

Atnipp said Winston & Strawn's Houston office, which opened in 2011, has about 60 lawyers, but is moving into new office space next month that will accommodate up to 100 lawyers. He said he aims to add M&A lateral partners, but also hopes to bring on labor and employment partners, along with commercial litigators with an energy focus.

The firm also launched an office in Dallas in 2017.

A spokesperson for Locke Lord said Dallas and Austin partner



Winston & Strawn.

Michelle Earley and New York partner Rob Evans are now co-chairs of Locke Lord's global capital markets practice, and provided a statement from the firm.

"Houston is an extremely competitive legal market, with out-of-state law firms paying extraordinary sums of money to recruit our home-grown talent. As we expect this trend to continue, we'll keep leveraging our more than 125 years of experience in Texas and our collaborative culture to build on our strengths, achievements and reputation of providing best-in-class service to our clients," the firm said.

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