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DAILY REPORT

Richard Hays' Leadership Turned Alston & Bird Into 'A True National Powerhouse'

By Thomas Spigolon

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What You Need to Know

- Industry leaders and experts believe Richard Hays helped grow Alston & Bird by being "a great salesman for the law firm."
- Hays also knew where its clients and practice areas best matched its future growth, they said.


Courtesy photo

Richard Hays of Alston & Bird.

Some legal industry leaders and experts believe Richard Hays led Alston & Bird by being "a great salesman for the law firm" while knowing where its clients and practice areas best matched its future growth.

The Atlanta-founded firm on Monday announced that Hays would end a 19-year run as managing partner to be succeeded by firmwide litigation leader William H. "Bill" Jordan beginning in January 2027.

Hays and Jordan were not immediately available for comment after the announcement, but some industry leaders and experts spoke about how Hays had successfully guided the firm—now a staple in the Am Law 50 firm—since 2008.

Recruiter and law firm advisor Jeffrey Lowe of CenterPeak said Hays' impact on Alston & Bird and its growth in the legal market "can't be overstated."

"He took a firm that, I think, was formerly known as a more regional firm and turned it into a true national powerhouse, making Alston & Bird among the 30 most profitable firms in the entire country," Lowe said.

Lowe said the firm now is known nationally for being "well-run" and "very disciplined."

"I think people who aren't as familiar with the firm are surprised to see how profitable it has become and where that puts Alston & Bird in relation to many of its national peers," Lowe said.

Under Hays' leadership between 2007 and 2025, revenue almost tripled to $1.44 billion—placing the firm No. 44 in the Am Law 100.

However, profits per equity partner (PEP) more than quadrupled in 18 years to $4.5 million—ranking it 28th highest, according to Law.com data.

Its total lawyers also grew by 15% since 2012 to 960, with income partners increasing more than twice as fast as equity partners, according to Law.com data.

Hays' brother, Robert Hays, is the long-standing chair at fellow Atlanta-founded giant King & Spalding, having sat in that role since 2006.

“Richard has been an extraordinary leader for his firm and community. He’s too modest to say it, but my guess is that he is most proud that under his watch the firm was able to grow and perform while at the same time maintaining the culture which has always been important to him from the day he started at the firm,” he said in a statement.

Doug Hinson practiced alongside Hays as a partner for 33 years at Alston & Bird and led its ERISA litigation practice group before retiring in 2021.

Hinson said Jordan “is going to be a great replacement,” but Alston & Bird “is definitely going to miss [Hays’] leadership.”

“Richard presided over tremendous growth at the law firm virtually in every way,” Hinson said. “Our geographic coverage has gone worldwide under his leadership.”

Mark Wasserman, who formerly led the U.S. side of global firm Eversheds Sutherland from Atlanta, said Hays was able to guide Alston’s growth while also making sure clients and fellow partners were happy with the direction he was leading since 2008.

“It’s not usual to do something for 19 years in that sort of a role,” said Wasserman, who left the Eversheds managing partner role in 2025.

“He’s had the trust and respect of his partners throughout that time and has done a wonderful job both leading the firm as a business matter but also being very active in the community and in the business community here in Atlanta and nationally,” Wasserman said.

Wasserman led historic Atlanta firm Sutherland Asbill & Brennan for 12 years and oversaw its growth nationally before it merged with U.K. firm Eversheds in 2017 to form Eversheds Sutherland.

He and Hays led competing firms over two decades in Atlanta and other U.S. cities—but also knew each others’ families and would share thoughts and advice throughout their careers, Wasserman said.

Hinson, who now leads the nonprofit ERISA Industry Committee (ERIC) Legal Center, said Alston’s profits “have gone up significantly” and “the folks that he has recruited into the law firm over the years” has proven “he’s just been a tremendous leader and a tremendous agent of growth for Alston & Bird.”

In the past four years, the firm has significantly grown head count in banking and finance (up 65%) and corporate and business (up 24%) while decreasing the number of litigators by 13%, according to Law.com data.

“I couldn’t be more proud of him and more thankful for that leadership,” Hinson said.

Hays joined the firm in 1986 and eventually worked as the firm’s financial partner and led Alston’s litigation and trial practice group before his election as managing partner in 2006. He began leading the firm in January 2008.

Hinson noted Hays was a contemporary of his after both were in a summer associate class together at Alston & Bird. He said Hays helped him as he developed his ERISA practice, and also was personally involved in almost all of the recruiting of partners to the firm—including those that grew the firm’s ERISA litigation group.

“I don’t think we ever brought on a lateral partner without Richard being intimately involved in that process and having influence,” he said. “He’s a great salesman for the law firm.”

Hays led Alston & Bird through the challenges of the Great Recession and COVID-19 pandemic but also led it to expand to Europe; grow in New York City, Washington, D.C., and Charlotte, North Carolina, open four offices in California and enter the Dallas and Chicago markets.

Wasserman said a firm leader must strike a balance in a number of areas to grow a firm’s footprint.

“You don’t want to be expanding just to expand and you don’t want to go to cities just because somebody said you should be in a city,” Wasserman said.

He said Hays had done a good job of following clients’ wishes and matching practices with the locations the firm expanded to.

“It isn’t easy because you’re always, in a law firm environment, going to have some skeptics about opening new offices,” Wasserman said.

“But I think Richard did a good job of strategically thinking about where those offices [should be] ... and also taking the temperature of his own partners to make sure they were on board strategically and he did a great job of that, as well.”