

An Interview with Pat Hatler

By Ali Haque

From the author: Patricia Hatler is the Executive Vice President and Chief Legal and Governance Officer for Nationwide, overseeing 1,300 professionals at Nationwide. She recently sat down with me to talk about what makes a good leader, what she expects from outside counsel, and about her personal journey that led her to where she is today.

I arrived at Duke as a freshman, having never seen the campus. When choosing colleges, my dad's only rule was that I not go to school in the state of Kentucky. He was adamant about that. He wanted me to know there was a big world out there.

I, of course, wanted to go to University of Kentucky – that's all I wanted to do. It's what everyone did. It was what I knew. I had even gone to the extent of secretly applying for and getting accepted into UK honor's program, and requesting financial aid if my dad wouldn't pay for it.

In the end, I went to Duke, sight unseen. It was luck that it worked out. In my life, I had been out of the state of Kentucky five times at that point. I didn't even know that I had an accent. Okay, it was more of a twang, something most of the Northeastern students at Duke had only heard in "The Kentuckian," or think they heard in "Deliverance." I got teased a lot about my accent.

I didn't plan to be a lawyer. I never even thought of being a lawyer until I was out of college.

I majored in cognitive psychology because it was interesting.

Cognitive psychology is essentially the study of how we perceive the world, manipulate what we perceive and remember it.

I loved it, it was absolutely fascinating. And to this day I still find connectivity to the things that I do. But by March of my senior year, I had concluded I did not want to pursue it academically for the rest of my life.

I graduated in 1976 – in the midst of a fairly bad recession – and there were no jobs. I

graduated from a good school, with high marks and lots of good recommendations. And, there was nothing. Nada. So, frankly, I took the only job that I could get – as a paralegal in a big Washington law firm. I knew nothing about the law. It was strictly, "I need a job. Will you hire me?" I found that I really liked it. I liked the people. I liked the work. It was interesting and thought-provoking. And I discovered that the folks I worked with weren't that much smarter than me, but they were earning a whole lot more. So, I went to law school.

Ms. Hatler joined Nationwide in 1999, after spending most of her professional career in Philadelphia at Independence Blue Cross as General Counsel and at Dechert LLP.

At that time, Nationwide had around 80 lawyers in their formal legal department. Nationwide had many different businesses, and there were fragmented legal practice groups throughout the company. At the time, Nationwide included a publicly held subsidiary, of which Nationwide Insurance was the majority shareholder. But the subsidiary also had public shareholders, and it was an enormously interesting and challenging professional opportunity for me.

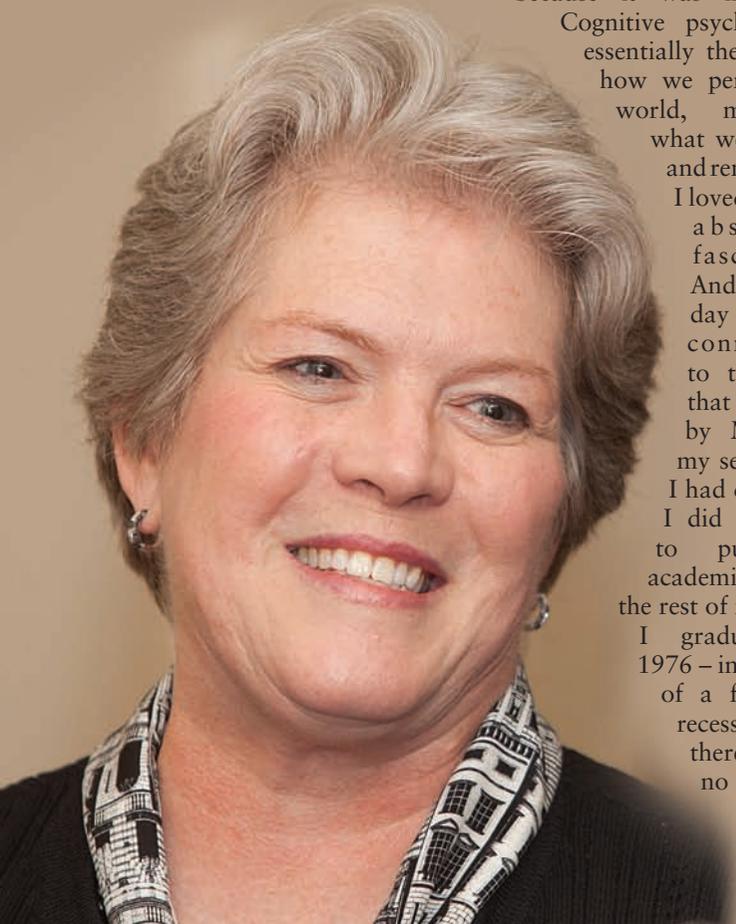
And I really liked Columbus – the size of the city, the mobility. It simplified my life a little bit. Columbus is big enough to have a really interesting population, a nice mix of culture, a good food environment and great neighborhoods near downtown. There are places where I would not have been as interested in moving.

My family intentionally moved to Bexley because it is so close to downtown and the airport. We have been living here 14 years. There is not a day that goes by that I don't appreciate being less than three miles from work. When your work and personal life are as integrated as mine, eliminating a long commute is life-changing.

I love my job. Every day for me holds new, interesting and engaging activities. And, I work with incredibly talented people. The diversity of people and work make each day a learning experience. And even though I am an attorney, in a corporation that is as large and diverse as Nationwide, I get to lead other functions as well. I probably would not have the opportunity to lead groups like corporate citizenship, government relations and compliance if I worked for a law firm.

Ms. Hatler currently oversees five corporate divisions of 1,300 professionals at Nationwide, and she maintains budget, operational, and talent planning responsibilities. Here, she talks about what it takes to be a good leader.

A leader needs to listen. I think it is easy to skip over that part. But listening builds trust. Many leaders want action. They want to articulate a vision and then see forward



momentum – fast. That’s really important, but experience has taught me that slowing down to listen should precede forward motion. Listen, Decide. Communicate. Act.

The more I do this, the more important I believe communications skills are. I manage 1,300 people in almost 70 offices across the country. Effectively communicating to a group as large and diverse as this is a unique skill set. It requires focus and practice. I don’t want to suggest that I’ve mastered it. I have not. I’ve simply become more attuned to my mistakes. That has helped tremendously. As naturally as it seems to speak and respond, effective communications must be a planful act.

Nationwide has a real commitment to the communities where it has offices, certainly in Columbus, but not just here. We are in communities all over the country. We are deeply involved at the local and national levels with United Way, Feeding America and Red Cross. Our commitment to children is also growing, especially through our partnership with Nationwide Children’s Hospital. Our associates are committed to donating time, resources and dollars to the groups they care about. Nationwide Volunteer Network fosters the company’s unique culture of caring.

When looking for outside counsel to engage, I’m first of all looking for real expertise. I have a feeling many of them would say I am looking for a magician – and there may be times when I am. Beyond that, we are looking for people who can really partner with us, can understand the business needs and craft solutions that will move the business forward. I put a great deal of value on what I call the translation function. There are a lot of very able lawyers who are very smart, but are incomprehensible to non-lawyers. The counselor – the skill of being able to take very complex legal issues and translate them effectively and concisely for non-lawyers – is incredibly important and powerful. Nationwide is not unique in having a group of executive leaders who are unbelievably busy. Their time is incredibly valuable, and they don’t have two hours to hear a treatise on “x, y or z.” So, that translation function is an incredibly important communication skill set for me.

My staff would tell you that it has been a long time since I’ve read a six-page memo. I am personally much more interested in bullets that distill the key points. It needs to be accurate. I need to be well-informed. But, I am a real believer that there are different ways of communicating to different groups.

Nationwide Insurance is a national leader in its diversity initiatives, and recently won the Minority Corporate Counsel Association Employer of Choice Award. Ms. Hatler’s commitment to diversity and inclusion is just as evident, at Nationwide and in the community at large.

Generally, more and different ideas make for better outcomes. If you don’t have diverse voices at the table, you will simply miss really important insights. We also need these diverse insights because our customers are diverse, and we need to think about the experiences they are having with Nationwide. If your people aren’t reflective of your customers, you’re probably missing something.

At Nationwide today, I think you hear a growing conversation about inclusion. That’s about leveraging our diversity – putting it into practice. I think historically,

diversity has focused – and appropriately so – on visible characteristics like ethnicity, race, gender, age. Today, I think there is a much more thoughtful understanding of diversity across many characteristics and creating environments where people feel free to express themselves. You can have a strong nondiscrimination policy – and you should – but if you aren’t overtly inviting people to the table and respecting them once they get there, you’re not reaping the full benefits of diversity. The Kentucky girl with the Appalachian drawl regularly reminds me of this.



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