

THE
AMERICAN LAWYERWilmer Taps NY White-Collar Partner As Next
Leader, For a Series of 'Firsts'

By Patrick Smith

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What You Need to Know

- Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr has picked its first new managing partner in over a decade.
- Anjan Sahni, with the firm off and on for 20 years, was also a decorated prosecutor at SDNY.

For the first time since 2012, Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale & Dorr will have new leadership, as current three-term co-managing partners Robert Novick and Susan Murley are stepping down and New York-based white-collar defense attorney and firm partner Anjan Sahni will take the reins.

Novick and Murley will finish out their terms this calendar year, with Sahni taking over at the beginning of 2024.

Changes

Sahni's elevation to managing partner signifies a few "firsts" for Wilmer, created in the early part of this century out of legacy firms based in Washington, D.C. and Boston. Sahni will be the first managing partner the firm has had that is based in New York, for one. The firm, including Sahni, said the decision was not based on wanting to make some sort of "statement" about the firm, but rather it just happened to be where Sahni was located.



Courtesy photo

Anjan Sahni partner with Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr.

"This is about who the best next-generation leader for this firm was, and it was Anjan," Bob Novick said in an interview. "And he happened to be in New York. We run ourselves as one firm."

Sahni is also the first post-merger managing partner that will serve alone. The firm has historically had dual managing partners, with Novick and Murley together leading the firm since 2012.

Both Novick and Sahni are aware of the potential challenges that could exist in turning two into one, but both also felt the structure of the firm will allow for Sahni to do the job well.

"This is a weighty responsibility," Sahni said. "It is a change in how we are structured, but it doesn't give me any pause. I will spend time throughout this year working with Bob and Susan and thinking through a leadership structure that will support one managing partner. It

is a change going from two to one, but the firm has been thoughtful and intentional about how that would look.”

Novick, when asked about the change, said the firm has “very strong practice heads” and that the infrastructure of the firm, including its business professionals, should provide additional support to Sahni should he need it.

Finally, Sahni practices Sikhism, which on its face shouldn’t matter one way or the other, but in practicality puts him in rarified air: A search of Am Law firms didn’t reveal any others that are led by a Sikh, or by anyone of South Asian descent.

“One of the reasons this particular role is appealing is the firm’s very authentic commitment to DEI,” Sahni said. “Bill Lee [a former managing partner at Wilmer] was one of the first Asian Americans to lead a firm. Susan Murley was one of the first women to co-chair a firm. Three of our five department chairs are women. The firm takes a lot of pride in how it positions its leaders with these issues keenly in mind.”

Moving Forward

Sahni joined Wilmer in 2002, practicing white-collar defense. He then left for the Southern District of New York where he remained until 2015 when he rejoined Wilmer.

Wilmer’s internal process for leadership selection aims to avoid open campaigning for the top role. The firm has a committee that—through interviews with partners, associates and other stakeholders—assesses potential leadership candidates and makes a recommendation. The partnership then decides whether or not to approve that recommended choice.

Sahni was on the list and won out.

He will have some large shoes to fill. Outgoing co-chairs Novick and Murley had quite a bit of

success during their 12-year run, which will end at the end of this year.

According to the firm, Wilmer increased its net income by 80% over that time period while also doubling its profits per partner, which currently stand at \$2.84 million.

Sahni is aware that there are high expectations both for him and the firm. His strategy for the firm is to maintain the success it has had thus far, while identifying opportunities to develop new or enhanced revenue streams.

“Overall, I want to make sure that we remain a multidisciplinary firm that is called upon to handle the most complex and challenging problems our clients face,” Sahni said. “And doing so while maintaining our very collaborative and inclusive culture throughout the firm will be a priority.”

Sahni did say that one element he is looking at is increasing the firm’s presence in transactional work, including M&A, private equity and capital markets, among others.

“I think we have a well-balanced set of practices,” he said. “But this is an area where we can grow at scale. We have a strong group of transactional partners and will be building from a position of strength.”

Sahni comes to the position with a strong resume. At SDNY, he was head of the Securities and Commodities Fraud Task Force from 2012-2015, led the investigation into Bernie Madoff’s accomplices on Wall Street, and successfully prosecuted Russian arms dealer Viktor Bout on terrorism offenses, among other wins.

“I’m very grateful for the position of strength that Bob and Susan have left the firm with over the last 12 years,” he said. “I come into this with the wind at my back.”