

Alleging Treatment as 'Sexual Object,' Dentons Employee Sues Firm

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By Roy Strom

Dentons has been sued in New York state court by a current employee who alleges she has been subjected to a repeated pattern of sexual harassment by a managing director of the firm's venture capital group.

Krunali Parekh, a business development specialist in the firm's New York office, said in her complaint filed Monday that Alton Delane, her direct supervisor, had kissed her on the face in front of colleagues, touched her in sensitive areas and used vulgar language to express a desire to have sex with her, all despite requests he stop making such advances.

A Dentons spokeswoman said in a lengthy statement issued by the firm that Delane had been placed on administrative leave when the global legal giant "first learned of the detailed allegations through threatened litigation."

The 20-page complaint claims that after Parekh several times raised concerns over Delane's behavior at Dentons, she was instructed not to discuss the matter with anyone outside the firm. The complaint states that Parekh was "repeatedly treated like nothing more than a sexual object."

"Ms. Parekh hopes to send a message to not only Dentons, but to all law firms, that the legal profession must embrace women as equals and not treat them as objects," states the complaint filed by David Gottlieb, a partner at New York's Wigdor. "Moreover, the public—including Dentons' wealthy corporate clients—should demand genuine leadership and accountability from the legal profession."

In its statement, Dentons said it has a "robust" code of conduct that includes antidiscrimination and retaliation prevention policy.

"We are deeply troubled by the allegations against a non-lawyer employee, which are contrary to our values and culture of respect," the firm said. "We take any concern about discrimination or unfair treatment seriously. The firm is committed to a workplace free from discrimination and harassment, and to fostering an inclusive and diverse culture."

A phone call placed to Delane went to a voicemail that said he did not have access to email or voice messages. While Delane is not a lawyer, the complaint filed against him and the firm by Parekh states that he is "treated like a partner" and is a "significant business generator."

Parekh's complaint also asserts that Delane's alleged misbehavior took place at work or networking events, at bars, as well as late-night phone calls that in one instance went on for three hours.

Earlier this year, Dentons suspended a partner in Europe who had been the subject of an investigation into inappropriate behavior. The partner, who later left the firm, was found to have engaged in behavior that Dentons said “fell well below the expectations that we have for our partners.”

The firm also was investigated this year by a U.K. regulatory agency over an employment discrimination case brought by a former recruitment manager who said she was retaliated against for taking maternity leave.

For its part, Wigdor and its founding partner, Douglas Wigdor, have been involved in a number of high-profile cases in the #MeToo era, including representing plaintiffs bringing harassment and other claims against Fox News, ride-sharing giant Uber Technologies Inc. and disgraced movie mogul Harvey Weinstein’s former production company.

“Law firms such as Dentons should set an example for how to provide a safe workplace for women,” Wigdor’s Gottlieb said in a statement. “It is unfortunate that Dentons has failed to be a leader in this #MeToo era, and has instead attempted to silence women who raise harassment complaints and intimidate witnesses who support those women.”