



## WITH LITTLER'S BROOKE E. NIEDECKEN

**What led you to pursue a practice focused on labor law and what are some takeaways from your career?**

**BN:** I went to law school to be a labor lawyer. A few pivotal early work experiences, including time with a company experiencing union organizing activity, solidified my interest in labor law.

After I graduated from law school, I eventually came to Littler and was exposed to a wide range of employment law issues, from employment litigation to unfair competition law, that to this day helps inform my practice and advisory work.

Nearly two decades later, I still love labor law and have transitioned my practice to focus on this area full-time. However, my prior experience as an employment lawyer has helped me to focus on problem solving and a cooperative approach to labor management relations. I've always been focused on the employer-employee relationship and the opportunity to facilitate effective communication to find common ground and shared goals. At the end of the day, we are all – management and labor – just people trying to do our best.

It's a widely held misperception that the law is by nature combative. While that is true in litigation, and it is certainly true of some labor/management relationships, there are many others where both sides are interested in working together to find a mutually agreeable solution to whatever issue they are facing. I find there are many businesses whose goal is for their outside legal counsel to be partners that work alongside them to problem-solve and provide advice that is tailored to their industry, business and overall goals. It isn't enough to know the law, many clients really want partners that understand their business and their culture. I've really tried to be the kind of partner who understands a business and, as a result, is cooperative, creative and/or aggressive when necessary.



## Who were some of the most important mentors and supporters in your career?

**BN:** When I first started practicing labor law, I was lucky to have Sherrie Passmore as my mentor. That luck continued when I met and learned from some of the best practicing right here at Littler, including shareholder Alison Day and one of my practice group co-chairs, Tanja Thompson.

These women were such important mentors, role models and friends at a time when most labor lawyers were men. While many of those men have been mentors, partners and supporters of me, I certainly faced challenges because of my gender. Like many other women in similar positions, I've been told to dress differently, been overlooked in meetings, spoken down to by others, and been unfairly expected to handle administrative work. Having these talented women to turn to for support has been so important over my career, and its thanks to women like them that we've seen so much positive change since I first started practicing.

## You mentioned how labor law has historically been a male-dominated field. What were some of the steps that Littler took to promote greater diversity and that helped you see a path toward leadership?

**BN:** Early in my career, it was very common to be the only woman in the room. Today, that is shifting. In fact, recently, I proudly walked into a trial where the female lawyers and judge far outnumbered the men in the courtroom. It's a remarkable change and the result of years of training, support and mentorship for women in this area of law.

As a co-chair of the Labor Management Relations practice, I've had an intentional focus on providing guidance for women and other underrepresented groups to reassure them that they belong in this area of the law. For example, our practice group has an apprenticeship program that pairs associates with more senior attorneys who can help them get hands-on experience and mentorship that makes progressing to leadership roles more attainable.

More broadly, Littler has done a great job of creating an environment that allows its attorneys to thrive professionally. The firm has always been enthusiastic about elevating rising stars and giving them opportunities to shine. Particularly over the last few years – with significant changes in the labor space and the benefit of our extensive geographic footprint – we've been able to bring in more junior lawyers and give them that valuable experience.

## What are some of the benefits of this move toward greater diversity in labor law?

**BN:** Diverse teams are stronger. Bringing together different backgrounds, points of view and ways of thinking in this area of law helps yield more interesting and creative results. A culture of belonging is also important, and our labor team knows that we can count on each other for advice, support, you name it. That's been critical to our success.

I also think it can be empowering to work with a diverse range of leaders who you can relate to and emulate. I remember being told when I was first starting out that it was impossible to do this kind of work and have a family – it is a demanding role with lots of travel – and that was disheartening to hear, but ultimately it wasn't true. I'm in a leadership role and have a family, and lots of other leaders at Littler have full personal lives. I hope seeing this makes it easier for younger lawyers to envision themselves as future leaders without having to compromise other aspects of their lives that are important to them.

## What advice would you give to younger lawyers who might aspire to a leadership role?

**BN:** Find great mentors and learn from them, be empathetic and supportive to those around you, and look for the ways you can create the change you want to see today. Most importantly, don't be afraid to go after what you want.



Brooke E. Niedecken, Esq.  
Littler Mendelson P.C.  
[bniedecken@littler.com](mailto:bniedecken@littler.com)



*Based in Columbus, Brooke E. Niedecken is a shareholder at Littler, the world's largest employment and labor law firm, where she co-chairs the national Labor Management Relations practice.*