DRIVING UBER

Top lawyer Salle Yoo talks about strategy, plans, and why her first four hires were women

BY ART JAHNKE
Photographs by Genevieve Shiffrar
SALLE YOO is not one to let boundaries hold her back. As the general counsel for online transportation network company Uber, Yoo (LAW’95), who joined the company in 2012 as its first lawyer and 102nd employee, played a key role in the creation of a regulatory framework that allows Uber to enter markets and introduce new products. From her vantage point, she has helped to disrupt the transportation industry and spur a fundamental shift in the way people get from point A to point B.

The status quo prior to Uber, says Yoo, had people driving their own cars, which she calls “assets that are generally at rest 95 percent of the time.” The leap ahead lands on the Uber model, one that in her words “connects consumers to affordable, on-demand transportation providers, provides millions of flexible earning opportunities, and via its uberPOOL and uberCOMMUTE products, reduces the need for personal automobiles.”

The company claims that in the first seven months of 2016, it eliminated approximately 312 million automobile miles—that adds up to 6.2 million gallons of gas and 55,560 metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions.

Uber—the German word means “over” or “beyond”—has come to epitomize not letting boundaries hold you back. The six-year-old company’s ability to get over and beyond traditional business models and mind-sets, regulatory hurdles, and lawsuits has helped to make it the world’s most highly valued private company, with an estimated worth of more than $62 billion. Uber now operates in more than 425 cities in 72 countries, where its smartphone app connects riders with drivers that show up within minutes and generally charge less than taxis.

Uber is Yoo’s day job. On her own time, she helps erase the barriers that prevent women, and minority women in particular, from scaling the partner ranks of law firms, barriers that have, according to the National Association of Women Lawyers, limited the number of female managing partners in the country’s 200 largest law firms to three. Yes, three.

Yoo got over the invisible professional ramparts and made partner at one of those firms, Davis Wright Tremaine LLP, before jumping to Uber. Today, the Uber legal department numbers more than 200 lawyers and legal professionals working from over 20 offices around the world. The company has faced more legal tests in a shorter time than any corporation in America, battling challenges from cities, states, transportation authorities, and customers and in the courts. The litigation battles include claims by drivers that they are employees of the company rather than independent contractors and cases involving the adequacy of background checks that drivers must pass before being allowed to accept ride requests.

Last year alone, more than 50 lawsuits against Uber were filed in US courts, as well as more in the United Kingdom, France, Spain, and Brazil. And yet, Uber continues to grow. The company reports that it provided 62 million rides in the United States in July alone.

BOSTONIA met with Yoo at her San Francisco office, where she talked about helping her company break new ground.

BOSTONIA: WHAT WAS IT ABOUT UBER THAT PERSUaded YOU TO WORK HERE?
Yoo: In April 2012, I tested the Uber service, requesting car service at my home in San Francisco. Before Uber, if I was lucky, a taxi would come within 20 minutes. With Uber, within eight minutes a town car picked me up and took me to my requested drop-off. Uber sent me a receipt that showed the amount charged for the ride and the route. I fell in love with the product there and then. It solved so many pain points. I didn’t have to pre-book a car; it was on demand. I didn’t have to wonder if or when the car would show up, so I could stay inside until it arrived. I didn’t need to worry about whether I had enough cash for the trip, since it was automatically charged to my credit card. And because I got a receipt that showed me the trip’s route, I no longer had to worry about being taken for a ride in a city I was unfamiliar with.

BOSTONIA: HOW DID UBER DECIDE WHICH CITIES TO GO INTO?
In 2012, as part of the green-light process for a city, we would procure or draft a legal memorandum that analyzed whether our business model could work within or beside the existing regulatory framework. Most of the time it did, because transportation is generally regulated at the transportation provider level—e.g., the limo or taxi company—and Uber simply produced a technology service used by those entities. As ridesharing emerged, we became proponents of smart regulation—regulation that makes sure that the ride is safe and insured—and we have continued on that
path. Rider and driver safety on our platform is really important to us and we continually strive to improve upon it.

**HOW IS IT THAT SO MANY REGULATIONS DIDN’T APPLY TO YOUR BUSINESS MODEL?**

With the emergence of smartphones, Uber created a frictionless way for people and cars to connect. The transportation regulatory framework, often drafted when railroads were the new innovation, had never contemplated that. So when we looked at the regs in cities new to us, they didn’t even apply to us. They applied at the transportation provider level, and generally not to a company that didn’t own vehicles or employ drivers, like Uber.

Then in 2013, we entered what is commonly referred to as ridesharing and what we called peer-to-peer transportation. This was something completely new. There wasn’t a regulatory framework for it. Coming from a regulatory law and litigation background, I knew that regulators would want to regulate this space, so I helped structure the business accordingly. We set up a separate entity that could apply for a license or permit and could also procure the insurance that would provide coverage to riders and drivers during the course of the uberX ride, our basic service. So we created this entity and worked with the California Public Utilities Commission on the regulatory framework.

Having a regulatory framework gives us operational freedom. Since 2013, we have worked with regulators to implement frameworks for ridesharing in more than 60 cities and states. And now we are working to have regulatory frameworks adopted internationally: Mexico, Australia, the Philippines, and places in Europe and in Africa have regulations in place, and we are moving forward elsewhere.

**WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE SECRET TO UBER’S SUCCESSFUL EXPANSION?**

First, the Uber product solves a real pain point experienced globally: the need for reliable transportation service at the time it is needed. Second, to grow fast, we had to make sure we had processes in place that would allow us to scale. We created playbooks and checklists and standardized launch processes and even legal review. We used a limited number of counsel across the country for key issues that came up over and over again, so we wouldn’t have to spend time getting new counsel up to speed on our business model with each city or country we wanted to enter. The standardization allowed us to move as fast as possible.

**HOW DO YOU EXPECT UBER TO EVOLVE?**

One of our core beliefs is that we have to be willing to disrupt ourselves. When Uber started, it was about connecting a rider to a licensed limousine or taxi driver. Then the market changed and ridesharing became a thing, as we say in Silicon Valley, and we had to decide whether to disrupt ourselves. We committed to it and that commitment continues today. From uberX, we went on to introduce uberPOOL, where riders going the same direction share a ride, then uberCOMMUTER, where drivers traveling along known commuter routes share their ride and are able to cover their costs with some nominal payment from riders. Along the way, we continue to expand our use of the Uber platform. We are now delivering food (via uberEATS) in a number of cities internationally. We also entered into deals with retailers such as CVS to deliver their products. I’m excited to see where we go next.

**TELL US ABOUT THE WORK ENVIRONMENT AT UBER.**

Uber is not like other Silicon Valley tech companies. You don’t see air hockey tables or an ice cream parlor inside the office. But you’re not in a traditional office, either—for one, you are not tied to your desk. Basically, you can work anywhere with your laptop and mobile phone. You may...
When you graduated from the School of Law, did you hope to work for a company that would rewrite the rulebook?
When I came out of law school, I wasn't ready to be a lawyer. I went to work on a congressional campaign in California. Unfortunately, my candidate lost, which meant I had to get a job. So I joined a law firm and started my career. I was at Davis Wright Tremaine for 13 years before joining Uber, and I found that I really enjoyed the practice of law.

What is it you like about practicing law?
Being a lawyer is ultimately about problem solving—mastering the facts, analyzing the law, piecing together the puzzle to reach the solution for the client. I liked my colleagues at Davis Wright, and further, I was motivated by a 2008 American Bar Association Journal article about the dearth of minority women making it to partnership. I was getting indicators that I had a shot at partnership, so I decided to try to make it. I was hopeful that I could solve the partnership puzzle, teach others how, and move the needle a little bit. And then came the opportunity to join Uber.

How could law schools positively impact the diversity numbers?
If you look at the law school numbers, you see that nearly 50 percent of the graduating classes are women. But the statistics of women who make it to partnership are still pretty discouraging. So, the issue isn’t really with the law school pipeline, it’s what happens when women enter the law as a profession. Firms and companies are concerned with women’s lack of upward mobility and are exploring ways to impact change.

What is the best way to improve things?
First, law firms have to be intentional about solving the problem. They need to ensure that women
and minorities are getting exposure to clients, to good work, and are being taught how to become a strategic partner to their clients. Second, they should look at whether existing partners are taught about their own unconscious bias. Unless we are aware of our own bias, we are likely to repeat history and affirm the status quo. Third, clients can be intentional about the lawyer they call to handle a new matter. I always look for the best lawyer for Uber—but I am careful about who I call at the firm, so that lawyer can claim us as a client and build a book of business.

Also, clients can tell their firms that diversity is important to them and encourage the firm to get aligned. When we rolled out our preferred counsel program for Uber last year, we asked each firm to share their numbers—specifically, the number of women and diverse partners and of women and diverse attorneys on their management committee—for the past five years. We encouraged them to tell us what they were doing to increase diversity, because it’s important to us that our lawyers reflect our own team’s diversity. I asked each firm to have either a woman or a diverse attorney as the relationship partner.

**HOW DID YOU BECOME A PARTNER AT A BIG FIRM?**

Working hard is a given. If I’m in town, I’m generally in the office on Sundays. But success in corporate America takes more than hard work. I’ve been fortunate to benefit from a number of amazing mentors—men as well as women, minorities and not—who have guided, advised, and pushed me along the way. These people would put me on interesting projects, teach me how to handle the work, and introduce me to potential clients.

But, I also needed people—call them sponsors—who would try to clear the path for me. They would say, “Hey, Salle should be put on this committee,” “Salle should go speak externally,” and so forth. They recommended me for leadership training programs and enrolled me in programs especially geared toward women leaders. On my end, I tried to learn, add value, and make sure that I made something of the opportunities I received.

I also learned to be willing to be transparent about where I wanted to go. That can be tough for a minority woman, especially one who grew up in a family that discouraged putting oneself forward in any way. Advocating for oneself can be very hard, even for lawyers—when it comes to our careers, we tend to be both confident and fragile. But a mentor told me early on that I shouldn’t hesitate to tell people that I wanted to make partner, because they can get behind you, and if they’re behind you, they will be aligned with you.

**COULD YOU TALK ABOUT THE ETHNIC COMPONENT TO YOUR RELUCTANCE TO SPEAK OUT?**

My father’s highest compliment for anyone is that they are “sincere” and “serene.” Having grown up with those values, it was really hard to draw attention to, and advocate for, myself. As I progressed in my career, I had to teach myself to speak up—telling myself this was a skill I needed to succeed. So, each time I had to have an uncomfortable conversation, whether asking for fair billing credit on a client matter or advocating for a higher salary, I just told myself it was an opportunity to practice skills I needed to get where I needed to go.

These seem like very simple, basic principles, but to a young lawyer who doesn’t have a tradition that values self-advocacy—and, in fact, everything in her upbringing goes the other way—the first few times were really hard. When I needed to push myself a little harder, I told myself that if I can figure out how to do this for myself, I can perhaps help other Asian American women and give them a little push.

**HAVE YOU HIRED MORE WOMEN THAN MEN AT UBER?**

My first four hires to the Uber legal team were women. I didn’t intend to hire just women—I went out to hire the best people out there with the skills and experience Uber needed. But when I took stock, I had to check in and make sure I wasn’t overindexing into my own unconscious bias. I haven’t looked at the numbers in some time, but a couple of months ago someone told me the legal team has more women, as a percentage, than any other team at my company.

I believe we got there by recruiting for the best talent, being intentional about the mix of candidates we interview, and holding ourselves accountable to building strong, talented teams that reflect our customers’ diversity. We are in over 72 countries worldwide. Having a diversity of perspectives and experiences helps us scale as a truly global team and celebrate the cities where Uber operates.

**WHAT PERSONAL GOALS DO YOU WANT TO REACH IN YOUR WORK?**

A mentor told me that there are three elements to job satisfaction: Is it impactful? Is it interesting? Is it fun?

I feel that at Uber, I have an opportunity to have impact. In addition to solving transportation problems, I’m really excited at the flexible earning opportunities created by the Uber platform.

On the second peg, I feel fortunate to be the general counsel of an interesting company at an interesting point in its history. I’ve had the opportunity to solve a number of problems. Every day brings new challenges.

As for fun, it’s great to work with bright, creative, motivated team members who strive to use technology to solve real-life problems and who seek to peer around the corner to what life will be like 5 years, 10 years, down the line.