

ALUMNI CONNECTIONS FEATURED PROFILE

Alumni Profile: Flora Feng, Senior Director & Legal Counsel, Asia Pacific Region, PepsiCo

Narges Kakalia, a Member in the firm's New York office, caught up with Flora recently to reconnect and learn where life has taken her since she left our New York office in 2006.



// PUBLISHED

March 2015

// PROGRAM CHAIR

Narges Kakalia

How does one go from being an IP lawyer at a Fortune 50 company in Purchase, New York to the general counsel of its Asian business units in Bangkok, virtually overnight?

I have no idea! I wouldn't say it was overnight either! But I think it's a combination of being open to opportunities and having mentors — and they don't have to be formal mentors, just people who help you grow and develop professionally. I had previously discussed with my boss, the SVP for Global IP & Regulatory Law, the possibility of working in Shanghai, where PepsiCo has a large R&D center, if the opportunity ever arose. In the meantime, PepsiCo had been trying for a while to hire someone for the position I now hold, but hadn't been successful and decided to look for candidates within the company. The Deputy General Counsel of PepsiCo at the time asked if I might be interested in moving to Bangkok and taking on this role. I had not really considered living anywhere other than the US or Shanghai, nor had I ever practiced anything but IP law, but it was a once in a lifetime opportunity and she was so convinced that I could do this, that she convinced me. Plus the fact that when I asked my husband about it, the words "How would you feel about moving to Bangkok?" were barely out of my mouth when he emphatically said "yes." The rest is history.

And so you and your family moved to Thailand about a year ago so you could take over the position of general counsel to three of PepsiCo's Asian business units. What has it been like?

It's been very exciting and also a little surreal. Life in Bangkok is very different from life in the New York metropolitan area. I have learned (the hard way) that sometimes I can't control the timing of things because Bangkok traffic is just unpredictable and worse than any traffic I've ever seen in New York. Some days that's a good thing, as it forces me to slow down. Other days — well, it sends my blood pressure through the roof!

Was it a big adjustment for you and/or your kids?

We all adjusted differently. My oldest son, for example, went from a school in the US where he had been with the same class of kids from kindergarten through fourth grade, to a school in a foreign country where he didn't know anyone. What's worse, he's at a British school, which means there's no baseball and no Yankees fans. But we managed to find a baseball league here, he's made friends, and Skype has been a great way for him to stay in touch with his friends back home. My husband is a partner in his own company, so he had to adjust to working from home every day (which isn't a bad thing considering the Bangkok traffic). He has been a much better student than me and picked up a lot more Thai, but there are a lot of

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ex-pats here and most of the Thais in Bangkok can speak at least a little bit of English. I'm also lucky to have a wonderful assistant at work who has helped me and my entire family, making the adjustment so much easier. We also have some dear friends who have lived here in Bangkok for six years and have provided invaluable advice. The entire ex-pat community here is really helpful. One thing we've all taken very quickly to, though, is the delicious Thai food (my son is a big fan of green curry now, my daughter loves pad thai, and my youngest loves morning glory, which is a very common Thai vegetable). What we're all still trying to adjust to is the heat and humidity — although it does allow us to go swimming almost all year round!

Tell me more about your current position and responsibilities.

As you know, I've been a patent lawyer for most of my career. I knew one specific area of law, and I knew it really well. But most of what we do as lawyers does not require exhaustive knowledge of a single subject matter; rather it requires the ability to spot issues, figure out solutions, and know when you need to consult with experts. As an in-house lawyer, no matter if you're a specialist or a generalist, you have to understand the business and be able to balance the legal requirements with business needs. In my current role, I have responsibility for South Korea, the Philippines, Japan, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Mongolia, Brunei, East Timor, and a few other countries/territories that I have to look up on a map. Within these countries, we have franchise operations, company-owned operations, joint ventures, licensees — pretty much any business structure you can think of. On any given day, I may be confronted with a lease issue in Hong Kong, an employee issue in Manila, a trademark issue in Japan, an immigration issue in Thailand, or a regulatory issue in Malaysia. I can practically recite the FCPA by heart now, and am becoming much more familiar with competition, corporate governance, and labor laws across Asia. I am constantly learning something new, and there never, ever, EVER is a dull moment. When I travel for meetings, sometimes I forget what country I'm in and I'll say "hello" or "thank you" in the wrong language. I'm also managing a team of eight people, which is the most people I've ever managed, and we're sitting in two countries.

What has it been like culturally?

In the US, I've always identified as Chinese-American. Here in Asia, I'm not "hyphenated." I'm "the American" in the office (there actually aren't very many Americans in our Bangkok office). My legal team is comprised of an American (me), five Thai, two Vietnamese and an Indian. We have Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, and atheists. It's been an adjustment living in a non-Judeo-Christian-based country. We have gay, lesbian, straight, and transsexual employees in our office. Almost everyone speaks at least two languages. The native English speakers are from many different English-speaking countries, so even understanding English was a challenge for me at first. You can't assume anything about anyone here — most people have lived in multiple countries and have fascinating backgrounds. Americans have the luxury of being able to do everything in their home country — get an education, go on vacation, etc. Most of the people I've met have gone to school or worked outside of their home country, and in many cases, they've done so in a foreign language. It makes us Americans seem so inferior in a global sense. But on the other hand, it makes me appreciate what a great country the US is and obviously I miss being home. Professionally, one of the challenges of my job is integrating local customs and practices with the culture and policies of an American company, without alienating either side. It's hard to achieve that balance, but it's a win-win when you can take the best of both and combine them. Oh, and the food is fantastic here! Not just Thai food — there's fantastic Japanese, Italian, Mexican, Lebanese, Indian, Chinese — you name it! It rivals Manhattan, but the prices are much better!

What is one thing you wish you had known when you were graduating from college? Grad/law school? Would you have done anything differently? Any advice you would give 1990-Flora?

That they hire chemical engineers at wineries. My career could have gone in a completely different direction! Seriously though, I think that one thing you always wish your younger self had would be more confidence. But that's something that comes with experience, at least for me. And honestly, sometimes it's just better NOT to know too much or you might be overwhelmed or intimidated by overthinking. I think that is one of the advantages of being young — you don't know that there are limitations and you believe that anything is possible.

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You've achieved an impressive amount in a short span. We hear increasingly about the fact that women can't have it all, that it's harder than ever to balance high-stakes careers and family. How do you make it work? Is there a secret to your success? Can you share your strategies for negotiating work and life and succeeding at both?

It doesn't feel like a short span. It's been a lifetime in the making. And I don't think that you can have it all, either as a man or a woman. The "successful" people that I know all have one thing in common: a supportive partner and/or network of friends and family. It really does take a village. The fact that I have both a happy home life and a satisfying career is very much due to the fact that my husband, Jeff, has been supportive, that we have shared equally in domestic responsibilities, and that we have valued each other's careers. He started his own company 10 years ago and I encouraged him to do it. Now he's supporting me by coming here to Bangkok with our kids. He had to handle a lot on his own because I had to come out here ahead of them. We wanted to make the move as painless as possible for the kids, so he stayed to let them finish the school year before we moved them. Work/life balance is like a see-saw. Sometimes one side is heavier than the other and very rarely do you get it to balance perfectly. It's more of an averaging of the overall picture. I was talking to someone recently about this and about how we redefine what our idea of "success" is as our lives change. I think that's important. If you get stuck on one inflexible ideal, I don't think you ever can achieve "balance."

What are you reading these days?

I've just started reading *Game of Thrones*. I haven't watched the show yet, but am planning to when I have time! I'm also reading *We're Going On A Bear Hunt* (over and over again), Dr. Seuss books, Clifford The Big Red Dog books, and fairy books.

If you weren't working as the general counsel of a Fortune 50 company's Asian business unit, what would you be doing instead?

Driving my kids crazy.

Best part of waking up every morning?

Seeing my kids and my husband, especially if the kids haven't woken me up in the middle of the night. And knowing that I have no idea what new experience I might have today.