

**19
89** | **OVER
TWENTY
FIVE
YEARS**

Executive of the Month: Johnson-Šantic, global project management lead, corporate real estate services at Cushman & Wakefield

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Elyse Johnson-Šantic,
Cushman & Wakefield

New York, NY The New York Real Estate Journal recently sat down with Elyse Johnson-Šantic, Assoc. AIA, global project management lead, corporate real estate services, of Cushman & Wakefield for a Question & Answer Session.

Q: Where did you grow up? What did you want to be when you grew up?

A: I grew up in Uniondale, N.Y., which is a town in Long Island. Besides an Olympic gymnast, I have always wanted to be an architect.

Q: What pointed you down this career path? Any early connections?

A: I have always loved design, Legos, puzzles, and anything related to building. Architecture is something that I have always wanted to do. I was also that child who would take her toys apart to see how the parts worked together and I enjoyed the challenge of putting it back together; ultimately to see if it still functioned. Somehow my parents did not get upset. I think they were amused by my curiosity. My mother also spent a great deal of time talking to me about art and architecture. She never hesitated to discuss a building or point out an architectural detail whenever we went somewhere.

Q: How did you get started in the business?

A: After I graduated from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, I began my professional career in the architectural acoustics field at Walters-Storyk Design Group. I was part of the design teams for Alan May Listening Room/Home Theatre, Allaire Studios, Carter Burwell Studios, Ex'Pression Centre for New Media, James Earl Jones Theater, Lower East Side, and Timbaland Studios.

Q: What are the many roles you have worked in throughout your career? How has that impacted the way you think about the company now?

A: I have had four different roles in my career. The first was practicing architecture, the second was in project management, the third was leading a large account, and now the fourth is focusing on our real estate portfolio. My current role is the culmination of everything that I have done throughout my career.

As you grow and gain experience you realize what things are important to you as an employee.

I have always wanted to be in a place that supports new ideas, mentorship, has a clear path for succession, development, and where there were leadership opportunities. Cushman & Wakefield offered them all and so it was an easy decision to join this firm.

Q: What about your daily work interests you? Why this industry?

A: I love being able to peek into each market and see how they work, what makes them unique and how their local culture helps to create the culture of the firm as a whole. I also love the challenge of coordinating all of the different parts of any project to deliver something that will impact the future of the firm.

Moving from design, to project management, to account lead, to corporate real estate seemed like a natural progression for me. Some of it was chance, and some of it was by design. My thirst for knowledge is what drives me to always look for more.

One of Johnson-Santich's Dallas portfolio projects.

Q: Of all the roles you've played, what's been the most interactive? What was your favorite?

A: The role that I am in now is the most interactive because I am exposed to nearly every aspect of how our business is run in addition to the design and construction of the office space. When we are determining the real estate strategy for a particular market, I get to see what the business drivers are that ultimately determine if a certain deal should be done, where the office should be located, and then translating the business goals of the firm into the architecture of the space.

I absolutely love what I do now, but my favorite will always be when I was working as a senior project manager at TPG Architecture. We had just completed the design and construction of CNBC's global headquarters and we did tours of the space with the employees before their move. The employees were so excited to move into their new space, that instead of waiting for the movers, some of the employees put their moving boxes into their car and

drove their belongings to the building. I was so proud of our team for delivering something that was loved by our client, and we received a design award for that project. That accomplishment is something that I will always cherish.

Q: What are some of the most important lessons that you've learned from the people that came before you? Who were some of your role models?

A: Some of the most important things that I have learned is to check your ego at the door, the only agenda should be to deliver a first class product, and to never ever speak ill of anyone.

My parents have been my biggest role models. They immigrated to the United States from Guyana, South America in the 1960's during the height of the civil rights movement and put themselves through undergraduate, graduate and medical school. Despite everything that was stacked against them during that time - as foreigners and people of color who did not have equal rights, they persevered, attended NYU Medical School and Columbia University. My father started his dental practice, and he and my mother raised me and my four siblings on Long Island. My parents always spoke of the importance of your family name/reputation, always being truthful, sharing not hoarding your knowledge, being exceptional at all times, and that what you do impacts those around and those who come after you.

Professionally, I have admired Jim Phillips of TPG Architecture, Glenn Olney of GE, Neil Tucker and Barry Ludlow of Design Republic, Jay Liese of Corgan Architects, Jennifer Marko of Salesforce, Jim Schwartz of JAS Consulting, Jim Anderson of Healthfirst, Lisa Kiell and Ken Siegel of JLL, and Kevin McCann, Todd Schwartz, John Santora and Jennifer Price of Cushman & Wakefield. Every one of the people who I have listed has had a profound impact on my career and I must say that our Cushman & Wakefield team is spectacular. I have never worked with a more supportive, intelligent, and honest group of people in my entire professional career. They are incredible human beings who are the embodiment of teamwork, thoughtfulness, service delivery and excellence. They recognize talent and will do everything in their power to help foster someone's professional development. It is truly inspiring.

Q: What was the biggest challenge you faced working your way up?

A: One of the biggest challenges that I have faced working my way up was getting a seat at the table. Sometimes opportunities are given to you and sometimes you have to create them for yourself. I have always chosen to seize any opportunity and so once I was at the table I made sure that everyone knew who I was, why I was there and that I was there to stay. More often than not, I am the only woman in the room. This is nothing unfamiliar because when I attended RPI, the male to female ratio was 6:1. I stand out and so I have always seen this as an advantage and used this opportunity to reinforce the fact that I am a contributor, I possess the skills, knowledge and passion for excellence, and that I would elevate the quality of work; subpar work is not an option. Like my parents taught me, be exceptional at all times. I mentor several women and I hope that everything that I do makes their career path easier. This is why I think that the Women's Integrated Network at Cushman & Wakefield is so important. I also look forward to the day when our female leaders are viewed simply as leaders and are held to and judged by the same standards as everyone else.

Q: What is your plan for the next year, five years and ten? Anything specific you have set your sights on?

A: My plan for the next year is to continue to work on our real estate strategy and deliver best in class space to our firm. I am not sure where things will take me in the next 5 to 10 years; only time will tell. I do, however, plan to continue to learn, grow, share my knowledge and serve as a mentor to anyone who asks.

Q: What are the main industries you service? Who do you feel would benefit the most from your services?

A: Cushman & Wakefield's core services include tenant representation, valuation & advisory, capital markets, agency leasing, asset services, investment & asset management, global occupier services, facility services, and project & development services. The sectors include airports & ports, automotive, financial services, data centres, education, energy (oil and gas), food & beverage, government, healthcare, higher education, hospitality, industrial, land, legal/professional services, life sciences/pharmaceutical, multi-family, net lease investment services, not-for-profit, residential, retail technology and technology.

As a leading global real estate services firm everyone would benefit from our services.

Q: What does the future of our industry look like? Any predictions or insights?

A: I think that the future of our industry is disruption. Consumers want more options, access to these options by swiping on their phone or clicking a button on their mouse, whenever they want, and wherever they are. If you look at what Airbnb is doing to the hotel industry, what Uber is doing to the taxi industry, or what Amazon is doing to the shopping mall, and now with its acquisition of Whole Foods, potentially to grocery stores, then no industry should consider itself safe. Technology aided in this disruption. We are already seeing shorter leases, more subleases and a lot more co-working and sharing spaces.

Q: Looking back on your tenure at Cushman & Wakefield how has the company changed since you started?

A: We are approaching two years post-merger with DTZ and so the biggest thing is that we have gotten a lot bigger. Whenever any firm goes through a merger, there is always an adjustment period. It has been interesting seeing how the firm has been restructured and how the roles within our organization have changed. One major benefit is that we now have access to a larger wealth of knowledge.

Q: How about the industry as a whole?

A: Technology has had one of the biggest impacts on our industry. As more people work remotely, utilize co-working spaces, shared conference centres and landlords create amenity spaces, less and less dedicated office space is now required. Digital platforms such as an app or virtual reality has changed how people tour space, 3D printing has changed the procurement of materials, and BIM has changed the design and construction process.

Q: Going forward, what do you think the most important thing is for Cushman & Wakefield to do in order to maintain its quality and reputation?

A: I think our firm has to continue to attract and retain the best talent and ensure that our

current leaders continue to mentor our future leaders. We have some of the brightest minds in our firm who possess a tremendous wealth of knowledge. And to quote what we believe, “alone we are good; together we are great”.

Q: As an employee of Cushman & Wakefield what makes you the most proud today, tomorrow and looking forward?

A: I am in a unique position where I get to sit in on the meetings where the senior leaders are making decisions that will impact the firm for years to come. What makes me proud is the fact that they are always questioning how these decisions will benefit the employees, our clients, the planet, and of course, grow our business. They are always looking forward. What I also like is that our leaders are always open to listening to new ideas; whether it be creating a new service line, having the firm sponsor a charitable organization, or hosting an event to foster employee engagement. If you have an idea, Cushman & Wakefield will give you the tools that you need in order to develop it so that you can see the full realization of your idea. We are a large firm, but there is still this entrepreneurial spirit that exists.

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