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MVP: Gibson Dunn's Krista Hanvey

By **Kellie Mejdrich**

Law360 (November 20, 2026, 4:00 PM EST) -- Krista Hanvey, co-chair of Gibson Dunn & Crutcher LLP's employee benefits and executive compensation practice group, advised SpaceX on benefits issues involved with its acquisition of xAI resulting in a combined company value of $1.25 trillion, along with other high-dollar deals, earning her a spot as one of the 2026 Law360 Benefits MVPs.



Her biggest accomplishment:

Hanvey, who is also co-partner-in-charge of the firm's Dallas office, recalled her work as lead executive compensation and employee benefits counsel for Elon Musk's aerospace manufacturer Space Exploration Technologies Corp. on its acquisition of xAI, an artificial intelligence startup that's also owned by Musk.

The M&A transaction was the largest on record and resulted in a combined company valued at $1.25 trillion, followed by SpaceX's $75 billion initial public offering later in the year, which also broke records as the largest public offering on record.

"It was fun," Hanvey said, describing issues at stake in the deal as "a lot of employee holders and solving for, how do you get liquidity for those people."

Hanvey said even though the dollar value was the highest, it wasn't the deal that took the most time for her this year, recalling a busy year overall with multiple high-value transactions. Other major deals included her work leading advice on executive compensation and employee benefits matters for SM Energy Co.'s $12.8 billion definitive, all-stock merger agreement with Civitas Resources Inc., as well as AT&T Inc.'s $5.75 billion acquisition of Lumen Technologies Inc.'s mass markets fiber business.

"This year has just seen a lot of deal activity, so it's been juggling lots of really interesting, really large consequential deals," Hanvey said. She recalled how many deals have involved unique transaction structures, such as tender processes, which can provide liquidity for existing shareholders.

Why she's a benefits attorney:

Hanvey described herself as "a super nerd" and "one of those few benefits attorneys that came out of law school knowing I wanted to do this."

Hanvey said she started out as an attorney focused on cases involving the Employee Retirement Income Security Act and slowly added more executive compensation work, with her practice now covering both areas in depth.

Her interest started in law school, Hanvey said, adding, "And then when I got to Gibson, I sat myself next to the ERISA partner here, and was just very persistent that this is what I wanted to do."

Her advice to junior attorneys:

Hanvey said junior attorneys should "jump in."

"I always tell our first-years … you're doing it right if you feel like you have no idea what's going on for like the first three years, especially in a specialized group like ERISA," Hanvey said.

She added that while junior attorneys might be afraid to take on matters they don't understand, "The way you really learn is to just take projects that make you feel scared and challenge you."

When asked about attorneys who might counter that mistakes could get them in trouble, Hanvey said: "Making mistakes is how you grow — that's how you learn."

What motivates her:

Hanvey said "problem-solving and helping people" are her motivators, and she gains satisfaction from finding solutions, particularly in dealmaking, that make all parties involved "as happy as possible."

"I think in the exec comp space, particularly with deals, there's a lot of times people will think that their two positions are, you know, one has to win and one has to lose," Hanvey said. Almost always, she said, there's a better compromise out there that the parties involved can feel good about.

"I love diving in and trying to figure that out," she said.

--As told to Kellie Mejdrich. Editing by Kristen Becker.

Law360's MVPs are attorneys who have distinguished themselves from their peers over the past year through high-stakes litigation, record-breaking deals and complex global matters. A team of Law360 editors selected the 2026 MVP winners after reviewing nearly 1,000 submissions.

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