

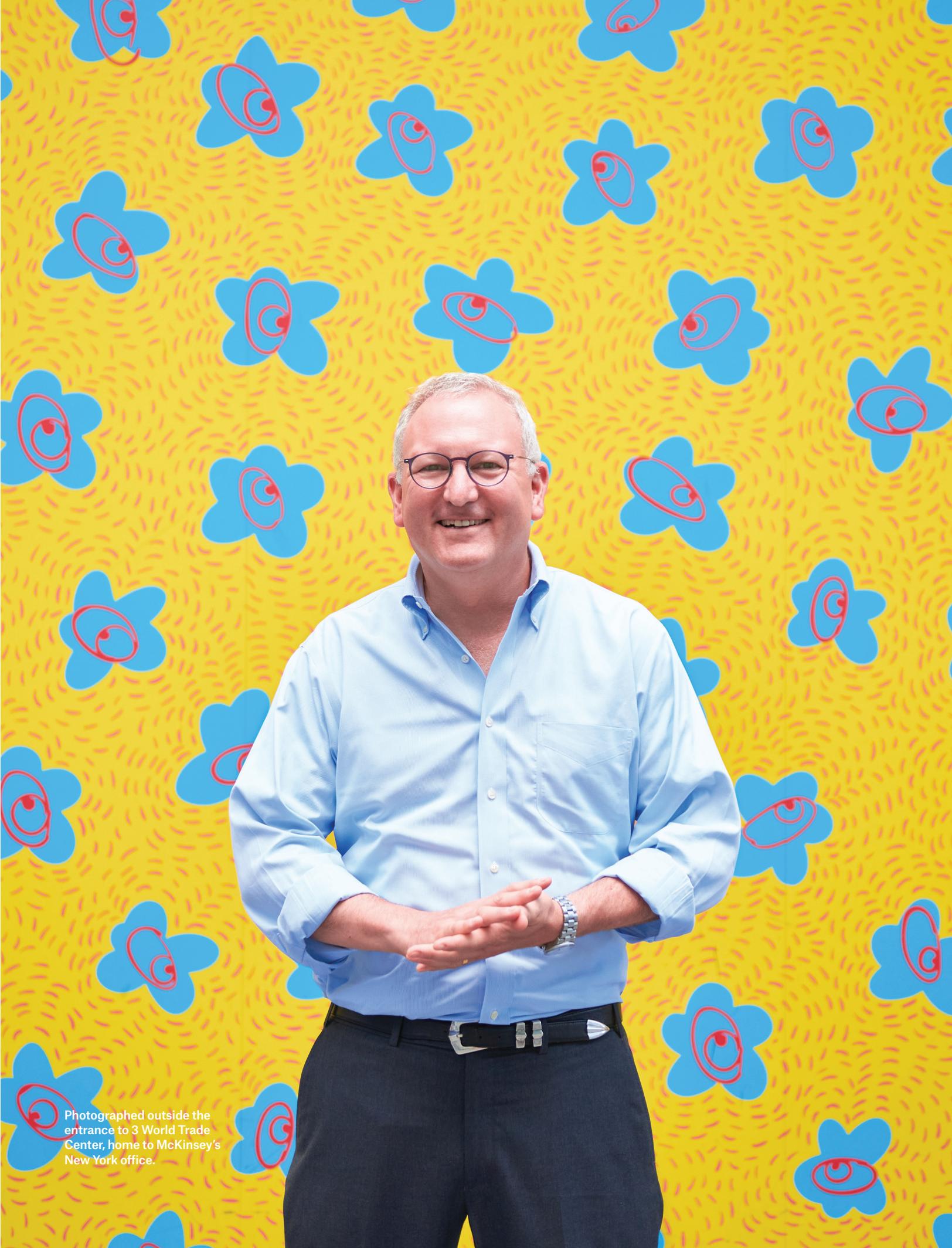
IN THE 96-YEAR HISTORY OF MCKINSEY & CO., Pierre Gentin is the first Senior Partner not to have served as a management consultant. Hired into the storied partnership in 2019, Gentin is McKinsey's Global General Counsel, and his legal résumé includes tours as a federal prosecutor in New York, as the Global Head of Litigation for Credit Suisse, and as a Partner at the Wall Street firm Cahill Gordon & Reindel. • But ask Gentin about his trail-blazing appointment at McKinsey—or his previous career in banking—and he's more likely to point out that his undergraduate focus was poetry and that he never studied business or economics. "How did I get here?" he asks, adding with a laugh that he's reminded of the Peter Sellers character in "Being There," a film about an uneducated gardener mistaken for an aristocratic wise man. If that humility sounds practiced, Gentin suggests that perhaps humility should be. "Before the Holocaust, there was a famous yeshiva in Eastern Europe called Novardok, and one of the ideas of the yeshiva was fighting the desire for personal acclaim. The students would go into a hardware store and ask for fruit, and they would get abused by the owner.

## MCKINSEY'S

# UNORTHODOX

# G&C

On paper, **PIERRE GENTIN** is a legal All Star. In person, he's a lot more. By **MICHAEL FRANCE** and **KEVIN HELLIKER**.



Photographed outside the entrance to 3 World Trade Center, home to McKinsey's New York office.

‘Are you stupid?’ The students would do all sorts of things to keep the ego in check.”

In an hour-long interview with the *Brunswick Review*, Gentin talked partly about the law but a lot more about leadership. “It’s a higher compliment to be told you have a great team than to be told that you’re great,” he says, “just as it’s a higher compliment to be told you have a great family than that you’re a great guy.”

Since Gentin joined McKinsey nearly four years ago, its legal function has doubled in size to almost 300 people. “I inherited a great team from my predecessor. Now I want McKinsey Legal to be one of the great legal functions of any company in the world. I have a point of view on what the best work looks like, and we are increasingly bringing that to life.”

“McKinsey’s legal department went through a significant transformation with Pierre joining,” says Lucy Lopez, a former Deputy General Counsel at McKinsey and current General Counsel at Spencer Stuart. “In a short amount of time, the lawyers at McKinsey had more of a seat at the table; we were developing content, holding dialogue circles broadly across the firm, bringing in speakers, leveraging our strengths and expertise both internally and externally, and working incredibly hard but having a great deal of fun.”

Gentin doesn’t believe in checking at the corporate door interests or hobbies from outside the office. McKinsey Legal’s blog, “In the Balance,” has included essays on how pursuits such as yoga, running and being a DJ can sharpen one’s skills as a lawyer. A musician, Gentin writes and performs songs for his team, typically about their adventures as McKinsey lawyers. For a McKinsey Legal charity run, he wrote and recorded a song with a message of challenge and inspiration:

*Running from excuses  
From all the reasons why  
Running from the arrows  
Whose sting we feel inside*

*Running to the sunlight  
The music clear and strong  
Running to the hand  
Outstretched to pull us on*

Before receiving his law degree from Columbia, Gentin studied the humanities at Princeton. “Thoreau says we should use our brains like a snout,” he said, adding that curiosity is an important trait he seeks in job candidates.

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Gentin’s influences are eclectic. During his conversation with the *Review*, he mentioned not just Henry David Thoreau but also T.S. Eliot, Oliver Wendell Holmes, George Harrison and William Osler, the so-called father of modern medicine. “Osler said, ‘You only find what you’re looking for, you only recognize what you know,’” Gentin said, when we discussed moving beyond conventional thinking.

An Orthodox Jew, Gentin disagrees that religious inspiration should be entirely off limits in the workplace. “The notion that something so fundamental to the lives of billions of people should be hidden at the office? I find that amazing.”

That his spiritual interests extend beyond Judaism is clear from his long friendship with Father Patrick Ryan, a Catholic priest and Fordham University scholar who holds a Ph.D. from Harvard in Islamic Studies. “Pierre isn’t afraid. He really wants to understand the points of view of people of other faiths,” says Father Ryan.

Gentin believes that young people in particular want more from their careers than conventional understandings of professional success. “The average age at McKinsey is 30,” he says. “When you talk to young people about music, poetry, yoga, spiritual life—you cannot imagine the reaction you get. This stuff is on people’s minds. They’re trying to figure out, ‘How can I have not just a meaningful career but a meaningful life?’”

In a talk he gave one night this spring at his synagogue in New York’s Westchester County, Gentin argued against the dogged pursuit of either material wealth or spiritual isolation, suggesting that a worthier goal may be what the late American poet John Berryman called “the middle ground between things and the soul.”

Gentin spoke with Brunswick Partners Michael France and Kevin Helliker.

**Is there an issue at this moment that strikes you and your fellow GC’s as most urgent?**

There are always ongoing legal matters that are urgent in the sense that they’re time sensitive. But for me, the more macro issue that’s urgent is: How do we move beyond exhaustion, in all the meanings of that word? When I talk to other GCs, we’re wrestling with the same issues. People are both tired and restless. Work demands can be relentless. COVID obviously has exacerbated everything. There’s a concern that when you come to work, in person or virtually, you’re really struggling to keep that energy level up.



So how do we reenergize? My view is that the arrows of inspiration are actually flying over us all the time. But do we reach up and grab them? Mostly not. If we do, it can be transformative. There are troubling headwinds. Geopolitics, global economic challenges, COVID's lingering effects, and so on. There is a need to find and develop a more fundamental centeredness within our professional communities.

**Have you pursued that centeredness within the legal function at McKinsey?**

We've tried. We have a concept I call "professionalism and passion." The professionalism is expressed through increasing our responsiveness, upgrading our internal client service, protecting our firm and developing deep relationships of trust between our lawyers and our internal clients. I ask each of my colleagues at McKinsey Legal to bring those professional objectives to life in their own style, with their own charisma.

The plus that we encourage is unlocking the passion of the individual professional. I'm convinced there is an appropriate and joyful way to bring

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into our work life things that energize us personally—music, athletics, external speakers, volunteering, relationships with universities, mentorship. We can share our passions and insights in different languages through our McKinsey Legal blog, "In the Balance," which goes out to almost five million people on McKinsey.com.

My goal is imagining a professional environment that can integrate the things each of us is passionate about. How do we celebrate the differences between people and build a dynamic notion of community, without sacrificing things like professional strength, rigor, innovation?

Alongside my life as a working lawyer, I've always tried to do other things—teaching at law schools and business schools, for instance. But my real interest is in blending intellectual inputs that aren't typically combined. The question I want to understand about other people is: What are your inputs? What inspires and excites you? What are the commitments that move you, the creative activity that lights you up? What do you love about engaging with other people? How do we celebrate our collective humanity while we are serving as world-class

professionals in our work life? I have learned a lot listening to the answers to these types of questions.

### Have you yourself been inspired by a colleague's life outside the office?

I have a superb colleague at McKinsey who is the talent manager for our Legal function. I've been working with her for three years. Oftentimes when I call her, I'll hear beeping. She's at the hospital. She has a child who is often in the hospital. I tend to say, "Why don't we talk tomorrow?" She says, "No, we'll talk right now." And we get the work done and she's always on top of everything.

No one in her position should have to hide the fact that they're working from the hospital. She's taking care of her son. It's inspirational. And the truth is there are people like her all around us. People who are incredible human beings and who maintain that professional excellence.

I interviewed her for our blog and I put it on LinkedIn and people just loved her story.

### Is there more to being a good general counsel than just following the law?

I think being technically strong is a baseline in any profession. That's true whether you're a doctor, lawyer or bus driver. Whatever your field.

But we make a big mistake if we stop there. The role of the general counsel is evolving. It's not just a function of staying inside the "Legal" box, but being able to bring judgment to a range of topics. Again, let's consider the whole range of inputs that can help us solve problems. The broad swath of human wisdom. Not every answer comes from the *Harvard Business Review*, as valuable as it is. You know, Aristotle may have something worthwhile to say!

I would add that being a lawyer isn't how I define myself. I'm here to help tackle challenges that go beyond the law. They're cultural, they're strategic, they're business issues. They're personal issues that people are working through.

The law is a substantive body of knowledge, but more than that, it's a way of thinking. Thinking like a lawyer means being factual, analytical and strategic. If you're a good lawyer, you listen to people. Often you realize that the specific issue they're most focused on in the moment is actually the manifestation of a deeper problem. That's what we really need to identify and address. In doing so we can leverage a lot of different inputs.

### Your appointment as the first non-consultant Senior Partner at McKinsey makes you a pioneer

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**MICHAEL FRANCE**, a former journalist and corporate lawyer, co-leads Brunswick's global Industrials and Infrastructure sector. **KEVIN HELLIKER**, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, is Editor of the *Brunswick Review*. Both are Partners in Brunswick's New York office.

### among leaders. Any general thoughts on the promises or perils of leadership?

Anyone who works with me would say I'm professionally demanding. My position is, if we're working together on something, we must aim for excellence and distinctiveness. That's non-negotiable.

But too often leadership can come to represent hierarchy and power. In Judaism there's a strict prohibition against worshipping idols and Hasidic philosophy adds that the ego itself can be an idol. When we start to worship ourselves, there's no place left for God.

In business life, it's very easy to get caught up in the ego, to believe that "I" actually have something uniquely valuable going on. Our identity and self-esteem can become linked very closely to the hierarchy of organizations. The "Senior Partner" is more important than the "Partner" who's more important than the "Senior Associate." That sort of thing.

What I've learned is that these are roles. Each of us occupies one professional role or another and we need to fulfill those roles as well as we can. But that's not who we are as people. George Harrison, one of my great heroes, said something like, "I wrote some tunes. You think that's who I am? That's not me. That's just this guy who wrote these songs."

### What would you say to those who argue that there really isn't time in the day for philosophy?

I would disagree. There's a lot of time in the day. It's about what we prioritize.

If I don't get to synagogue in the morning, I pray at home: It's 15 minutes and it changes my day. It's not about informing my next business decision. It's about changing my mindset, being sensitive to different things, being grateful, being mindful. It gives me more tools to respond to situations. It can allow me to see connections I'd otherwise miss.

Eliot says in *The Wasteland*: "These fragments I have shored against my ruins."

That's how I think about it. These different things, these arrows of inspiration, they don't seem interrelated but they are. There's a wholeness we're struggling to realize. Connecting the dots across experience. It's an amazing idea, that this pursuit of wholeness—business issues, people issues, the professional and the personal—is at a deeper level what we're really trying to achieve in our lives.

I was discussing this with somebody the other day. They pointed out to me that the word "integrity" and the word "integrated" are related. Both come from the idea of the "integer" as a number that has no fractions. An integer is whole. Isn't that amazing? ♦