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The Women to Watch: No. 8, MUFG's Bitá Ardalan

By Alan Kline

Managing Director, Head of Commercial Banking, MUFG Union Bank

MUFG Union Bank may not be the largest commercial lender in the western United States, but under the leadership of Bitá Ardalan it is arguably among the most disruptive.

Over the last several quarters, Ardalan, a 32-year veteran of the San Francisco-based bank and its head of commercial lending since 2015, ditched her unit's old compensation model in favor of a new, incentive-based one designed to help retain top lenders and attract high performers from other institutions.

She spearheaded the development of a new term sheet process that has enabled lenders to make preliminary offers faster, and she has put the bank in better position to win deals.

And she built out a new niche business line lending to middle-market private equity groups to go along with the bank's fund finance niche that Ardalan created earlier in her career.

These and other aggressive moves by Ardalan and her team are paying off for the \$124 billion-asset Union Bank. Though commercial loan demand has been tepid industrywide much of the last two years, Union Bank is increasing lending – particularly to middle-market firms – at a faster clip than its peers, according to Tim Wennes, Union Bank's West Coast president.

“Under Bitá's strong management, commercial banking continues to punch above its weight, with loan growth, credit quality and staff retention all above industry averages,” Wennes said.

Before being named to her current post, in which she oversees all commercial lending activities in California and the Pacific Northwest, Ardalan headed middle-market lending for the U.S., founded the bank's national specialized lending group, and for many years was the commercial banking market president for the Los Angeles region. Her teams over the years have consistently ranked among the bank's top performers, largely because Ardalan is never satisfied.



Erin Patrice O'Brien

Bitá Ardalan, Head of Commercial Banking at MUFG.

“I consider the status quo to be the enemy,” she said. “I always want to know how we can learn and make things better for next time.”

Ardalan is equally committed to nurturing the careers of young bankers, particularly women. Despite the demands of her job, Ardalan is always generous with her time and is quick to provide advice and guidance, according to bankers she has mentored. “Bitá has encouraged me to never settle for a role that I am comfortable in,” said Samira Alesafar, a senior relationship banker who aspires to be a top-tier private banker. “She often tells me, ‘As soon as you start feeling comfortable, that's the time you need to keep growing.’”