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The Struggle To Achieve Equity Partner Status

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When the National Association of Women Lawyers released its annual survey at the end of last year, the statistics regarding women equity partners were sobering. Only 16% of equity partners are women. On average, only 15% of a firm's highest governing committee members are women, and 15% of the national's largest firms have no women on their highest governing committee. Furthermore, only 6% of firm managing partners are women. Since men earn almost \$90,000 more than women at the equity level, ignoring the hurdles women face is not an option. When we spoke to women lawyers about the hurdles women face on the path to equity partnership, they inevitably identified three challenges: (1) a lack of role models or mentors; (2) the increasing importance of a book of business; (3) work-place bias.

Lack of Role Models

Christine Kirchner of Chamberlain Hrdlicka in Houston, believes a lack of role models is an important hurdle women lawyers face. "As an associate in our commercial litigation group," she recalls "I was the only woman for a number of years and did not have anyone to serve as a mentor or 'follow in their footsteps' in building a practice, networking or developing business."

"Additionally, as a younger woman," she continues "I believe it is difficult to develop business when many of the decision makers within companies are still men and feel comfortable handing work to lawyers with whom they have developed a personal relationship over the years." As a result of a lack of role models or mentors, Kirchner had to look to other women that practiced in the commercial litigation area that had been successful in Houston to develop her own "mentoring system" outside of the firm. Her initiative was instrumental to her development of her own book of business and ultimately becoming a shareholder at her firm.

Increasing Importance of a Book of Business

The second most important hurdles women face in achieving equity partner status is that the practice of law is becoming increasingly dependent on the ability to build and maintain a book of business and be financially viable within a private law firm. "The days of either men or women serving as true 'service partners' on a book of business developed by another partner are over," says Christine Kirchner. "Each partner must be financially viable and responsible for not only developing, but maintaining and growing their book of business over time" she concludes.

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The challenge for women lawyers is that it is difficult for them to learn marketing and networking skills. Kirchner explains the dilemma as follows:

“I firmly believe that clients send work to lawyers based not only on competency and skill, but more importantly to lawyers they feel comfortable with and trust and with whom they have a relationship. Although there are as many women as men currently graduating from law school, overtime, women tend to drop out of the private firm practice given other opportunities to use their law degree in a non-practicing attorney status or to work in-house in a corporation. Therefore, there are simply fewer women competing for the equity partner ranks and out of that group even less women are successful in developing the relationships necessary to build a viable book of business and achieve equity partner status within their firms.”

In order to make progress, Kirchner believes women need to learn marketing and networking skills early in their careers. She recommends that firms particularly focus on young women if they are not an adequate number of women partners within the firm. “Some ways of doing this,” she shares “include one on one mentoring programs, financially supporting the attendance of women at leadership conferences and other seminars focusing on skills that women need to develop to be successful in business relationships.”

Kirchner also believes that young women associates need to take more initiative in identifying various opportunities that will allow them to grow relationships and networks, “such as serving on civic boards, becoming involved in community activities, and bar activities that will allow them to develop a reputation of competency and skill in their particular legal areas, as well as forming relationships that can lead to referrals and other opportunities.” To a certain degree, she insists, women lawyers need to learn how to be rainmakers from day one.

Leila S. Narvid of Payne & Fears, LLP in San Francisco agrees that most female junior attorneys lack training in business development and identifying career aspirations and goals. She attributes this in part to the fact that these topics are not taught in law school, but are so vital to thriving in the private sector.

Narvid believes that many law firms and professional organizations, when tackling the problem of retaining women attorneys at firms and promoting women lawyers to partners, focus on the “work life balance.” “While it’s a valuable lesson for all attorneys - women and men alike - to learn how to lead fulfilling lives as attorneys and not sacrifice their family and social lives,” she says “‘work/life balance’ programs don’t teach women how to rise to the top of their law firms and build their own books of business.” In fact, Narvid has seen how such programs can even harm women, by perpetuating the stereotype that women are not “go-getters” and are too concerned with non-career goals.

In Narvid’s view, law firm associates need more formal training on career and business development. “Women lawyers need to learn how to create a business development plan, how to seek mentors inside and outside the firm, keep in touch with clients, promote their successes and strengths, and take on leadership opportunities,” she concludes “These are the ingredients for developing business, and in this day and age — now more than ever — having a book of business is a requirement for becoming equity partner at almost all law firms.”

Gender Bias

The Struggle To Achieve Equity Partner Status, *Continued*

While developing mentors and learning how to grow a book of business are both important, some women believe a third challenge is to overcome inherent gender bias in the work place. "I think it is difficult for women to be equity partners," one attorney shares "because women are primarily viewed, even in 2009, as providing a supporting role instead of being a financial partner. It takes a lot of sacrifice, and sometimes a strong mentor, to convince others that women are equals on the business side of the equation." The same woman attorney, who asked that her name not be mentioned in this article, shared as follows:

"At my last firm, I was a non equity partner and even some of the equity partners treated me as their secretary - meaning that I was there to support them, not shine more brightly than them, and make them coffee and be subservient to them. Obviously, that was not in my long term plans."

The Bottom Line

The continued ascend of women lawyers to equity levels is inevitable as women continue to graduate from law schools at high levels. Yet, in order for women lawyers to break into equity ranks, several challenges will need to be overcome. Women must take the initiative to develop their own mentors and role models when necessary, with the ultimate goal of growing their books of business. Ultimately, law firms will also have a role to play, since gender bias cannot be overcome through women's self-initiative alone. With time, perhaps the survey results from the National Association of Women Lawyers will be less sobering.

