

Making the Case for Women's Initiatives in the Workplace

BY JULIE A. CROCKER

Many women attorneys in law firms comprised of mostly men will try to blend in with their male colleagues by trying to be “one of the guys.” They try not to bring attention to the fact that they are women, and you will often hear women say how they are the same as their male colleagues. They are not. Men and women are different. And that's okay. In fact, it's a good thing. Women bring different perspectives to the workplace and have different experiences that can benefit both law firms and clients.

An increasing number of law firms are embracing these differences and are attempting to create an inclusive and welcoming environment for women attorneys, and an increasing number of clients are expecting, and even demanding, diverse legal teams. So if law firms are not motivated to focus on inclusiveness and the retention of women attorneys solely because it is the right thing to do, then at a minimum, law firms should be motivated by the business benefits of diversity and the retention of women attorneys. Indeed, in order to remain competitive and recruit and retain the best talent, law firms must re-think and re-work their traditional methods of hiring and advancement and make a conscious effort to create a more diverse and inclusive environment.

Creating an Inclusive Environment for Women Helps when Recruiting and Helps Satisfy Client Needs

For the past 20 years, approximately half of all law school graduates have been women. (www.nalp.org/uploads/Membership/DiversityInfographic-Women.pdf.) If law firms are not focused on recruiting and retaining women, they are missing an opportunity to bring top candidates to their firm. Female law school

graduates at the top of their law school classes will have numerous employment opportunities and likely multiple offers from different firms. Having women-friendly policies and initiatives helps when recruiting these attorneys and can make a particular law firm a more attractive choice for someone considering their post-graduation options. If law firms want to attract this top talent, it can only help to demonstrate to female candidates that their firm is an inclusive and supportive environment where women can and do succeed.

In addition, corporate clients are increasingly looking to ensure that their law firms match their company and customer demographics. The more female attorneys a firm has, the more options a firm will have for staffing cases and deals and for satisfying specific client goals and needs.

Creating an Inclusive and Supportive Law Firm Helps Retain Women Attorneys

Women leave the practice of law at higher rates than their male counterparts. (www.americanbar.org/news/abanews/publications/youraba/2017/december-2017/aba-summit-searches-for-solutions-to-ensure-career-longevity-for.html.) There is no clear answer as to why women are leaving, likely because there is not a universal reason women decide to leave. One commonly cited reason for women attorneys leaving is that when they would like to have children, they are at a point in their career that demands the biggest commitment of time and energy. Some women will leave to join firms or companies that allow for more flexibility or a more family-friendly environment. Another reason women leave is because they perceive that their law firm does not advance or promote women in the same way as men. Also, some women leave because of the lack

of a model for success that women attorneys can aspire to become. It is difficult for a young female attorney to see a path to success and a long-term career when the majority, and sometimes only, people who have “made it” are men.

So how do you change a law firm so it can successfully hire, retain, and promote women? By making an already difficult job a little easier and by giving women the opportunity to excel. If women attorneys feel valued and appreciated and their job is flexible, they are more likely to stay, and law firms will benefit from the investment in training. Law firms will also benefit from the institutional knowledge of its women attorneys and the relationships that those attorneys have formed with clients. Positive firm policies and initiatives will also increase productivity and morale, and in turn, build a more productive and invested group of attorneys.

Women-Friendly Initiatives and Policies

Over the past few years, Taft Stettinius & Hollister LLP has been committed to advancing its women attorneys and has implemented a number of policies and initiatives that focus on women and that make their jobs easier. One of the first steps Taft made was to form a Gender Advancement Committee. Taft's Gender Advancement Committee was created to investigate the issues affecting female lawyers, to provide a forum to debate and discuss those issues, and to propose solutions to issues women face in the workplace. In furtherance of those goals, the Gender Advancement Committee hosts an annual Women's Symposium to address specific areas of concern. For example, at this year's Women's Symposium, a national speaker will be presenting on the unique challenges women face in business development.

Taft has also implemented an industry-leading parental leave policy that allows all attorneys to take up to 16 weeks of paid leave after the birth or adoption of a child. The policy applies regardless of gender, marital status, or primary versus non-primary caregiver status. The only requirement under the policy is that a Taft attorney be one of the parents of the newborn or newly-adopted child. Paid parental leave is available to Taft attorneys from the first day of employment at Taft — there is no minimum amount of time an attorney has to work prior to receiving this benefit. Taft's parental leave policy is among the most expansive packages offered among law firms. By comparison, private law firms in the U.S. generally offer an average of eight weeks of parental leave for primary caregivers and four weeks for non-primary caregivers. As anyone who is a parent knows, the transition back to work after welcoming a child can be hard. Taft's policy allows parents to spend more time with their new child, with the hope that their return to work will be easier and less stressful.

Taft also recently adopted a policy that makes a breastmilk delivery service available to mothers who are traveling for free. The service sends a package to the attorney's hotel or other travel destination so it is available upon arrival. The package includes a small box with a user-activated cooling unit and milk storage bags. When the milk is ready to be shipped home, the user activates the cooling unit, packages the milk, puts a pre-paid mailing label on

the box, and leaves the box at the hotel (or mail location) for pick-up. The service allows business-traveling moms to get breastmilk to their children overnight and takes the hassle and stress out of storing and traveling with breastmilk while on business trips.

To further support working mothers, Taft is currently researching a policy that will provide its attorneys with emergency childcare in the event a child's usual daytime caregiver is not available and for situations when a caregiver is needed on an emergency basis. An issue sometimes faced by working parents is when their child's babysitter or nanny is not available due to illness or other unexpected events, and that parent has work obligations that cannot be rescheduled or postponed. This emergency childcare benefit will make childcare services available to working parents on short notice so that they do not have to worry about the logistics of finding a backup caregiver.

Taft also moved to a one-class partnership structure and eliminated the two-class system of equity and income partners that had previously been in place. This change was made to advance Taft's culture and to allow all partners to have an opportunity to be in leadership positions and to have a positive impact on the direction of the firm. By implementing a one-class partnership structure, Taft has removed any barriers to equity partnership that women in law firms commonly face when attempting to obtain equity partner status, such as bias, a lack of fair

allocation of origination credit, and a failure to clearly define succession plans for clients, since law firms statistically see men inheriting clients at higher rates than women. One of the reasons for, and benefits of, this change is that women attorneys now have an equal opportunity to have true career development and leadership opportunities.

Policies and initiatives such as the ones described above may not be possible or appropriate for every law firm, but even if that is the case, all law firms can work toward equality by being aware of the issues women attorneys face and by offering flexibility to all attorneys when needed. Every law firm's goal should be to reach a point where diversity and inclusion initiatives are no longer necessary because successful diversity and inclusion has been achieved.



Julie A. Crocker is a Partner in the Litigation Practice Group of Taft Stettinius & Hollister LLP. She is a member of Taft's Executive Committee and Taft's Gender Advancement

Committee. Julie focuses her practice on commercial disputes, including shareholder litigation, litigation related to and resulting from mergers and acquisitions, and litigation involving commercial sales, negotiable instruments, and secured transactions. She has been a CMBA member since 2012. She can be reached at (216) 241-2838 or jcrocker@taftlaw.com