

Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Morrison & Foerster's Anna White

Law360, New York (December 17, 2013, 2:27 PM ET) -- Anna Erickson White is Morrison & Foerster's firmwide managing partner and a member of the firm's securities litigation, enforcement and white collar defense group in San Francisco. She has more than 20 years of experience in securities and other complex, high-stakes civil litigation. She has represented public companies, as well as their officers and directors, in securities class actions, derivative suits, internal investigations, merger and acquisition litigation, U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission investigations, and general commercial disputes. She has represented clients in a broad range of industries, including financial services, social and digital media, computer software and hardware, and consumer products.

As managing partner, White shares responsibility for managing the firm's nine U.S. and three European offices. She also chairs the firm's business review committee, which advises the firm on strategic conflict issues. Before attending law school, she was a Peace Corps volunteer in Cameroon, Central Africa.

Q: How did you break into what many consider to be an old boys' network?

A: One day, when I picked up my older daughter from day care, a frustrated caregiver said to me, "She is very willful and it will serve her well someday." I like to think she got that from me and that it's serving me (and her) well now. I have also been fortunate enough to have terrific mentors and colleagues at MoFo who have supported and guided me throughout my career. As a result, I have always felt that I was part of the team, not trying out for it.

Q: What are the challenges of being a woman at a senior level within a law firm?

A: The biggest challenge I have right now as a woman in the firm's senior leadership is finding the right balance between my service to clients and my firm obligations. While the roles require shared skills — problem solving, writing, interpersonal communication, creativity and oral advocacy — executing both well requires skillful balancing.

Another challenge that I and other senior women lawyers gladly face is the obligation to serve as an advocate and recruiter for gender diversity at the firm. We have many men in leadership positions who are sincerely committed to bringing more women up, but we have to acknowledge that the burdens of advancing that initiative fall most heavily on women. These women are often some of our busiest lawyers, with both practice and family obligations. As I said, this is something that I'm glad to do, but it can make a tough job a little tougher at times.

Q: Describe a time you encountered sexism in your career and tell us how you handled it.

A: At MoFo, I've always felt like I've been judged on the merits of my work, not my gender. It's one of the reasons that I've stayed here my whole career. That said, the times when I have felt at a disadvantage because of my gender, whether real or not, I've tried to confront it head on to clear the air.

For example, when I was a young associate, I was working on a case with a male partner and associate. They often talked about sports in my presence. Since, at that time, I had no interest in sports, I felt left out of the conversation. So, I spoke to them and we struck a deal that they could discuss sports, but only when I wasn't around. Later, when I became a baseball fan, I lifted the moratorium on baseball talk!

Q: What advice would you give to an aspiring female attorney?

A: Find a job that you enjoy. The more you enjoy it, the more successful you will be at it. That means thinking honestly about what is important to you. It could be a number of different things, such as the type of law or practice, having flexibility in your schedule, your work colleagues, or the firm or business culture. Ask questions, constantly. Build trust with your work colleagues — your assistants, peers, clients and supervisors. As a team, your success will be their success and vice versa. Develop a leadership and practice style that works best for you. It may require some patience, as well as trial and error. Finally, constantly challenge yourself to try new things and to do the best job possible.

Q: What advice would you give to a law firm looking to increase the number of women in its partner ranks?

A: Encourage dialogue on diversity issues within the firm, take a long-term view on women lawyers' career trajectories by being flexible on their schedules, and encourage and support good mentoring. In addition, giving women attorneys opportunities to shine by elevating them to leadership positions and providing them with business development tools to grow their practices demonstrate commitment to the development and retention of women lawyers. These are all things we do at MoFo.

Q: Outside your firm, name an attorney you admire and tell us why.

A. I'd have to say my father, and his former law partners at Erickson Beasley Hewitt and Wilson, which included several women. They are all mainly retired now, but worked together for at least 30 years and inspired me to become a lawyer. They worked hard on interesting cases, did great work and had a lot of fun together. What more can you ask for?

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