

Have We Entered The Era Of The Woman Law Firm Leader?

By **Aebra Coe**

Law360 (March 6, 2020, 11:57 AM EST) -- The legal industry kicked off 2020 with a flurry of announcements that women had been appointed to lead U.S. and global law firms, news some say could signal a turning tide in the male-dominated ranks of law firm leadership.

A 2018 survey by Law360 found that just 11.4% of respondents among the 200 largest law firms by headcount said a woman held a top position, such as firmwide chair or managing partner. But in the first few months of 2020 alone, at least five law firms announced that women had become their top leaders.

"I think this is a great time for women to be emerging in leadership roles in law firms," Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP chair Jami McKeon told Law360 in an interview. "It's long overdue, but it's a natural evolution of all the things firms have put in place over a series of years."

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So far in 2020, the industry has seen the appointment of Daryn Grossman as managing partner of Proskauer Rose LLP and women installed in top, firmwide positions at midsize law firms von Briesen & Roper SC, Beveridge & Diamond PC, Hanson Bridgett LLP and Manko Gold Katcher Fox LLP.

That followed the appointment of Dana Rosenfeld as Kelley Drye & Warren LLP's managing partner in October and Suzanne Liversidge as global managing partner of Kennedys in August.

"As you have women leading law firms and those law firms prosper and thrive ... all of a sudden the notion of having a woman chair isn't so foreign to people," McKeon said, pointing to women who have successfully led law firms over the past several years like herself, Kim Koopersmith of Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP and Regina Pisa at Goodwin Procter LLP.

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JAMI MCKEON
chair, Morgan Lewis

Morrison & Foerster LLP managing partner Tessa Schwartz called the movement toward gender equality in law firm management a slow and steady, concerted effort that has begun to pay off.

Law firm efforts like adopting the Mansfield Rule, fashioned after football's Rooney Rule, and other diversity and inclusion initiatives appear to have begun to move the needle. Under the Mansfield Rule, law firms pledge to consider at least 30% women, attorneys of color, LGBTQ+ and lawyers with disabilities for leadership and governance roles, equity partner promotions, formal client pitch opportunities and senior lateral positions.

The corporate world has seen more female in-house legal leaders in recent years, and that has resulted in more pressure being placed on law firms to up their diversity efforts as well, Schwartz said.

"When you have an increase in general counsel that are women and senior female in-house counsel, that tends to also result in clients being focused on diversity. And when clients are focused on any topic, law firms pay attention," Schwartz said.

There have also been more women promoted to partner in law firms than in the past, and women have made up increasingly larger portions of junior associate classes, which means the pool of women firms have to draw from when appointing a leader has grown, according to Munger Tolles & Olson LLP co-managing partner Hailyn Chen.

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"As you get lower down in the ranks in terms of age and seniority, there's generally more gender diversity, and so some of it could be a function of younger generations of lawyers rising into positions of leadership and those younger generations having a higher percentage of women than older generations did," Chen said.

Law firms that succeed at retaining and promoting women are those that have programs and groups like a women's forum that are backed up by a budget and supported by the firm's top leadership, said Lucy Stark, managing partner of Holland & Hart LLP.

"Showing concrete ways that, yes, we value this and we're putting our money where our values are," Stark said.

Another way law firms have been successful in their diversity efforts is by implementing strong training and mentorship programs for associates and providing opportunities for high potential talent to succeed, according to Schwartz.

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TESSA SCHWARTZ
managing partner,
Morrison & Foerster

"Being inclusive is not picking and choosing. It's making leadership opportunities available to everybody and making sure client opportunities are available to everybody," she said.

And law firms have to push past having policies in writing only and actually make those inclusive policies a part of their culture, she added, pointing to the fact that she has taken maternity leave twice while at her law firm and was promoted to partner during her second period of leave.

"The fact that the firm thought that was a good time to make me partner made me have confidence there was a commitment there," she said. "You can have policies, but are you encouraging people to take advantage of those policies?"

While the industry does seem to have made progress on promoting more women into leadership roles, diversity consultant Sharon Jones said she doesn't see it as a sea change.

"It's typical legal profession — slow. It's progress, but it's not fast," Jones said.

And even as more women are promoted to top leadership spots, if those appointments are only or almost entirely white women, then that does not constitute true change, she added.

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Of the five women appointed to top law firm posts this year, all are white women.

Many firms are quick to boast about their gender diversity accomplishments, even as their ethnic diversity fails to substantially improve, said Sandra Yamate, CEO of the Institute for Inclusion in the Legal Profession.

"At the end of the day it does not allow you to avoid the fact that you still have some of the largest law firms in the world that have very few equity partners who are people of color," Yamate said.

And, even looking at promotions of women to leadership spots, it's important to be cautious when evaluating those promotions as some titles, such as a single office managing partner, may in fact be "administrative roles" that do not wield the actual power the title implies, she said.

"It's not always clear the extent to which the title of managing partner conveys that same degree of esteem, power or influence from one firm to another," Yamate said.

And yet, despite her reservations, she says she is optimistic for the industry as more women leaders take the helm of law firms and influence their organizations.

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CEO, Institute for Inclusion
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Many of the legal industry leaders who spoke to Law360 said that one of the benefits of having more women leaders is in their ability to positively influence diversity below them — both through their influence and through the example they set.

"I am an eternal optimist," Yamate said. "I look forward to seeing the kinds of innovations and improvements these women leaders can institute in their respective firms, not to just extend a hand back to other women, but to all lawyers who are diverse in one form or another."

--Editing by Breda Lund and Alyssa Miller.