

The business case for women's initiatives is clear: women make up so large a percentage of the best legal talent that law firms cannot afford to lose or waste such valuable resources. Consulting companies like Deloitte & Touche have shown that initiatives intended to retain and promote women have tangible, measurable benefits for the entire firm. Deloitte increased the number of women partners, principals and directors from 97 in 1993 to 617 in 2003; it has had the highest percentage of women in these positions of the Big Four consulting firms every year since 1997, and was the first to have a woman board chair. Because its initiative led to practices and policies that benefited all employees, it also increased retention and satisfaction levels throughout the firm. Deloitte attributes its 1992 - 2003 increase in annual revenues from \$1.93 billion to \$5.93 billion in large part to increased workforce satisfaction, productivity, and commitment resulting from its Women's Initiative.

A successful women's initiative also advances law firm diversity. Diversity efforts are being driven both by firms' own good intentions and increasingly, by corporate clients' demands that the law firms representing them demonstrate a commitment to diversity, including gender diversity. In addition, more and more women are business owners, business leaders, and decision-makers who expect to see women lawyers in the law firms they hire. In this market environment, having strong, prominent women partners and leaders makes a law firm stand out - and attract good clients.

The absence of women at the top is in large part due to a male-dominated culture and work structure. While many of the difficulties of law practice are the same for men and women, women face unique obstacles, including sexual stereotypes, alienation in a masculine work environment, and childbearing issues. Women lawyers are increasingly knocking down barriers to advancement, but they are also leaving practice, dissatisfied by what they have to sacrifice to achieve success - or by what success brings when they reach the top. Capable and ambitious young women see few role models who validate the rewards of persevering toward partnership. They find little motivation to remain in an environment they find inhospitable, insensitive, and unfair to women.

Women's initiatives help counter these conditions. They help women develop the skills, strategies, clients, and power base to rise in the law firm and the profession. They create a sense of community and mutual support that make women feel committed to each other and to the firm. And at the same time, they can lead to cultural and institutional changes that make the work environment more conducive to the success of all who work there.

Women's initiatives can take many forms. Some are national or even global in scope, while others focus on a small group in a single office; some initiatives focus on changing firm culture while others concentrate on accomplishing one or two discrete objectives. Whatever shape it takes, there are some important points to keep in mind when instituting a women's initiative.

Articulate the vision and goals of the initiative. The purpose and goals of the initiative must be clear. A clear vision statement establishes the business case, inspires support, and motivates participants. Clearly stated goals allow selection of appropriate activities and measurement of the initiative's results.

When setting goals, it is first necessary to select the areas on which the initiative will focus. The following areas are common targets of women's initiatives in law firms:

- Recruitment
- Retention and advancement of women
- Building business development skills
- Access to business and professional development opportunities
- Marketing and promotion of women inside and/or outside the firm
- Encouraging teamwork and cross-selling by women in different firm offices
- Networking within the firm, the profession, and/or the business community
- Providing a support system for women in the firm
- Mentoring
- Access to role models
- Access to work assignments and/or clients
- Leadership development, including entry into firm management and power structure
- Educational programming, including diversity training
- Work-life policies and practices
- Supporting community-based women's initiatives
- Building good will within the firm and in the wider community

Ensure ongoing administrative and leadership support. A one-time event that features women is not a women's initiative. An initiative requires ongoing attention, direction, and activities. It also requires substantial support, especially from firm leaders at every level and from marketing, recruiting, and professional development personnel. Multi-office firms often have a coordinating committee for the firm's overall women's initiative, with on-site committees in individual offices. These committees may function independently and/or according to a central game plan. Every committee should meet regularly, and if a firm has committees in more than one office, the committees should also communicate. It is also important to build and maintain enthusiasm for the initiative, and to create a pool of current and future leaders who will ensure its continuity.

Publicize the Women's Initiative. If the firm is truly behind the initiative, it should show pride in it. Some firms publish brochures, issue press releases, and try to maximize media exposure for their women's initiative. Many tout their initiative on their website. One firm that does this is Day, Berry and Howard LLP, which has a link on its home page to a video clip about its "Women Working Together" program. (<http://www.dbh.com>) Firms also publicize their initiatives and promote their women lawyers internally, e.g., by regularly featuring women in firm newsletters or recommending women for staffing new client matters. The marketing department can assist in building a "brand" for the women's initiative, so that the initiative becomes associated with high-quality, well-respected programming and activities.

Win over dissenters. Resistance to a women's initiative should be tackled at the outset. Many men resent what they perceive as "favoritism," and many women see more harm than good in singling women out in any way. This is why it is important to be clear that the purpose of the initiative is to provide resources, skills, and support that will ensure equitable treatment and increase women lawyers' success in the firm and the profession. It is not to elevate women at the expense of men or by seeking special treatment for women.

An important by-product of a women's initiative is that the firm can become a better place to work for women and men. For instance, if one focus of the initiative is to create more accommodating work-life policies, there is no reason to restrict policies such as flexible scheduling, parenting leave, or non-traditional career tracks to women. Similarly, many programs and events sponsored by a women's initiative (e.g., educational events, speakers on topics of interest to all lawyers, affinity

groups for new parents) should be open to the firm's men. If the women's initiative sponsors an event solely for women, encourage men in the firm to invite their women clients to the event. You can also hold a pre-event networking period or reception where men can greet their women clients before the main program.

Monitor results and maintain accountability. Ongoing support for any initiative requires proof of its value. Quantify goal outcomes to the extent possible (e.g., number of women becoming partners, increase in business brought in by women). It is not always easy to prove cause and effect, especially in the short run. But over a period of months and years, the changes promoted by the initiative should become discernible.

To maintain accountability, the firm, as well as each department or practice group, should include initiative-related goals, measures, and results in every annual business plan. In addition, some firms use external resources to hold the firm accountable. Vinson & Elkins LLP has an outside Advisory Board, chaired by the General Counsel of one of the firm's major clients, to provide broader perspective and guidance, and to monitor the firm's progress toward achieving the women's initiative goals they have laid out.

Examples of activities supported by women's initiatives. Women's initiatives (and women's groups in firms without formal initiatives) sponsor an endless variety of activities and events. Here are a few examples:

- **Helping women in the firm get to know each other.** Women lawyers are encouraged to network internally and develop relationships with each other through periodic women's breakfasts or lunches, videoconferences, email chat rooms, meetings at firm retreats, and other get-togethers. They share stories, tips, strategies, and best practices, learn about client needs and business opportunities, find mentors and role models, and promote practice and career development.
- **Sponsoring a similar event for women every year.** Many women's groups sponsor annual golf outings, speaker series, or educational conferences. Some of these are full day or weekend events held at a resort or conference center, with women in the firm serving as faculty for educational programs and time provided for leisure, spa, and social activities. For instance, Jackson Lewis LLP, a firm that practices solely labor and employment law, holds a weekend-long "Women's Employment Law Conference" on the east and west coasts every year.
- **Holding public events that highlight women of achievement in law or other fields.** Women lawyers often honor women who have excelled in business, science, or the arts, as well as law. Notable upcoming and recent events
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 - An evening wine reception featuring prominent women winemakers (Sonnenschein, Nath & Rosenthal LLP,
 - "Women in Business Celebrate Women in Art" (Maslon, Edelman Borman & Brand LLP, which recently won the first SAGE Award for contributions to achieving gender equity in the legal workplace, and
 - A community-wide event honoring the "Top 100 Women-Owned Businesses" (Sedgwick Detert Moran & Arnold LLP, co-sponsored with the San Francisco Business Times).
- **Providing leadership development opportunities.** A large part of Holland & Knight LLP's women's initiative has successfully focused on leadership development. One aspect of the women's initiative is the "Rising Stars" program, which selects five women with 7 or more

years of experience to receive specialized leadership, mentoring, training, management, and marketing opportunities. Another is the "Leading Ladies" program, which provides a forum for senior women lawyers to strengthen personal and practice connections with each other, and to focus on bringing along the next generation of women leaders. At present, the Chair of Holland & Knight's Board of Directors is a woman, 25% of the Directors are women, and more than half of the lawyers elevated to partnership in 2004 were women.

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