



Strategies to support the women of the legal profession in the age of COVID-19



Margo's Master Plan

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As the COVID-19 pandemic dominates today's headlines, issues around gender equity, which grabbed our national attention following the publicity surrounding the #MeToo movement in 2017, remains a challenge in many industries.

The recent phenomenon of the so-called COVID effect, wherein women either have or assumed to have greater home- and child-care responsibilities as a result of the pandemic, has only compounded some issues relating to the progression of women in all industries.

McKinsey & Co.'s 2020 Women in the Workplace study highlights the fact that the pandemic has had a particularly negative impact on women's careers in this country, and that companies are now at an even greater risk of losing women who are critical to their workforce, including those who are current leaders or those who are on the path to leadership.

Fortunately, we do know how these factors can be mitigated in the legal profession. This is all the more important because women now generally constitute approximately half of all attorneys in law firms and corporate legal departments. As a result, what is good for women attorneys is good for business.

First, it is still critical for all law firm leaders, whether they be men or women, to continue to provide both mentorship and sponsorship for women attorneys — and to understand the difference between the two. Identifying mentors — those who can provide advice and guidance — is relatively easy, while finding true sponsors can be challenging. Sponsors are senior partners who actively speak up for their younger colleagues, ensuring that they receive credit for their work and due consideration for promotion.

Being a sponsor involves some risk — the senior attorney is making a bet on the future success of the junior one. To help address this issue, firms can create groups that formalize and facilitate sponsorship. Certainly support and interest groups for women are helpful in giving women an opportunity to listen to the experiences of other women, and to apply those experiences to their own careers. Perhaps even more important, though, are groups organized around industry or practice focus. Helping more senior partners see their shared interests with younger attorneys — even those with very different life experiences from their own — creates more natural sponsorship alliances.



to apply for a promotion than men if they feel they do not meet all of the job qualifications. Equally important, though, is the confidence of men in leadership to select women to follow in their footsteps. This Catch-22, that women don't get promoted without experience, but can't gain experience without getting promoted, requires intentional, often formal, efforts to create a sponsorship network that levels the playing field.

Second, firm leaders should acknowledge that women attorneys now have a new phenomenon to grapple with, "the COVID effect." Many women attorneys are also mothers, and statistics show that working mothers are losing far more work time to child care, virtual schooling and other pandemic-related household duties than working fathers are.

Whether women are actually cutting back on their work hours or are merely assumed to be doing so, it is vital that clear communication about work performance and expectations during the pandemic is part of any promotion or compensation discussion.

Third, supporting women attorneys through an active women's initiative that provides leadership opportunities and is a part of leadership at a firm or company is essential. That initiative should have fulsome internal programming but also external programming that enables women to learn how to network and to build the business they need to progress in their careers. In the past 20 years, I have had the opportunity to chair women's initiatives at three different large law firms. What works is when firm leadership devotes time and resources to ensuring the success of the programming and the promotion of women at the firm.

Fourth, consider training by an outside professional. Illinois now requires training for all employees on sexual harassment — but think about going above and beyond this to make the workplace more inclusive and civil. Live and interactive training is most effective and provides employees with the opportunity to ask questions and follow up when needed.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made clear that there is still a need to provide support for the progression of women in the legal industry. But we know that there are steps we can take now to ensure that women can progress past these challenges to ensure productivity and success for all of us in the legal profession. As a leader of women's initiatives at law firms and in my firm, I know that we have the knowledge and ability to enable women to continue their progress to the highest levels of the profession, even in the face of all of the challenges that we all are facing now.