

# Women's initiatives create opportunity and benefit in law firms

According to the U.S. Census, there are more than 400,000 women lawyers today who make up just over 1 in 3 (38 percent) lawyers. The year 2018 marked the 25th anniversary of the appointment of Janet Reno, the first woman to serve as attorney general of the United States, and still only a few firms focus on women in the legal profession, including judicial law clerks and judges.

Improvements are slow, but sure, as we saw from the recent midterm elections of 37 women lawyers – about 1/3 of all the women newly elected – and the all-female group of law clerks Justice Brett Kavanaugh hired for the 2018 term, pushing the balance of the entire law clerk class to more than 50 percent female for the first time.

Study after study reveals, however, that more needs to be done to close the equality gap.

One of the most-significant means of support law firms can have for women lawyers is adopting women's initiatives that provide a means for women lawyers to support themselves within a firm and deliver a commitment to the advancement and understanding of unique issues that women face at their firms.

## Women's initiatives make a difference

The [Winn Initiative](#) at Bradley Arant Boult Cummings LLP, chaired by partner [Tiffany deGruy](#), was formed over a decade ago in honor of Bradley's Ellene Winn, who, in 1958, became the first female partner in a law firm of any size in the Southeast, as well as one of the first few in the nation. "The Winn Initiative was formed as a reflection of Bradley's commitment to strong gender diversity, in our management as well as in our associate classes and partner promotions," said Ms. deGruy.

[Suzanne M. Bradley](#), associate in the litigation practice of New Jersey-based [Pashman Stein Walder Hayden, PC](#), is a founding member of the firm's [Women's Leadership Committee](#), which formed in the summer of 2017 as the result of ongoing discussions about issues the women lawyers faced both at the firm and in the profession generally.

"We felt that having a recurring, dedicated time and space to discuss the issues faced by Pashman Stein's women attorneys could help us to better support one another and bring about positive change within the firm," said Ms. Bradley. "We sought to improve the work experience at Pashman Stein, and we have implemented an improved parental leave policy and a formal evaluation process for year-end reviews, which affects all firm attorneys. To support our women attorneys, we are planning networking events and developing other ways to gain greater exposure within the firm and the communities in



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which we live and work. The committee strives to continue to attract women attorneys to the firm, while retaining the great attorneys that we already have in place.”

**Danielle Hultenius Moore**, partner with Fisher & Phillips LLP in San Diego, is co-chair of the firm’s **Women’s Initiative and Leadership Council (WILC)**, which she helped found.

“I was sitting on the board of an organization that advances women both in and out of the legal community several years ago and it inspired me to approach the firm about implementing a similar program internally,” said Ms. Moore. “While we had had diversity initiatives for many years, I felt that it was important that we had a specific gender-focused program that looked at issues unique to women and helped recruit and retain our talented female attorneys; helped increase female leadership within the firm; and sought to advance women externally, as well. WILC Ambassadors in every office communicate WILC Initiatives and serve as a resource for gender-related issues, and a Steering Committee makes decisions and pushes initiatives to advance our goals.”

“WILC has made so much progress since we began,” noted Ms. Moore. “We started a leave liaison program to help women who go on and off maternity leave. We instituted the WILC Forum, which is a creative, collaborative sharing of alternative business development ideas, including gender-focused events with female clients, to help our female attorneys build their networks and books of business. We instituted a part-time program for equity partners (we already had programs for associates and non-equity). We instituted a leave transition program for new mothers, whereby their hours requirement is reduced the weeks before their leave and after their leave. We built a WILC Resource network with recommended resources such as emergency childcare and breast milk delivery services. We have become an active participant in the OnRamp Fellowship, and we launched a WILC Welcome program that introduces each new female attorney to the firm and our resources.”

Ms. Moore is proud of these accomplishments, and of the Steering Committee. “It is comprised of six women who are dedicated to advancing the rest of the women in the firm (at all levels),” she said. “WILC has accomplished more in the past couple of years than most committees do in a decade. I think the firm is dramatically different today than it was five years ago – in part, because of WILC.”

According to Ms. deGruy, “The heart of our program has always been focused on mentoring and increasing our attorneys’ development in their practices. As Bradley has enlarged its footprint, we have added Winn liaisons in each of our nine offices. We instituted a quarterly newsletter to help encourage growth; celebrate achievements; maintain a strong sense of team; and share recent client successes, career achievements, community/pro bono activities, personal announcements or milestones, and reading or podcast recommendations. We also created a Winn library filled with resources to help grow our practices.”

## **Differences that add value and new business**

Ms. deGruy also values the impact of the Winn Initiative on those outside the firm.

“Our clients and recruits appreciate the firm’s support of the Winn Initiative,” she said.

"Many of the female recruits cite the Winn Initiative as an important reason for their decision to join the firm. The Winn Initiative also hosts client events where we get to interact with many of our female clients. Feedback from clients at those events has been extremely positive," she said.

Ms. Moore also acknowledges the positive client reaction to her firm's response to RFPs.

"I had one female GC tell me that our proposal was accepted because I had built an almost entirely female team. We have also received a number of new clients through the various programs that WILC is involved in like the National Association of Women Lawyers (NAWL) and the Women, Influence & Power in Law Conference (WIPL). Those programs have also given our female associates the opportunity to build business, make connections and strengthen their reputations. Lastly, recruits have absolutely noticed and commented on WILC. My office is predominantly female, and I have had several recruits tell me that our WILC efforts and my presence in the San Diego office played a role in their decision to join us."

Ms. Bradley said what makes her firm proud about the committee is "the universal interest and participation we have had since our inception. While we are a relatively new committee, we are confident that drawing on the talents and perspectives of the women at Pashman Stein will benefit our firm and our profession."

In reflecting on the impact of the culture at the firm, Ms. deGruy said, "I am most proud of our women, the connection we share, the support fostered by the firm, and the culture we have created. Not only do we have initiatives that focus on boosting professional skills, leadership, mentoring and business development, we also help support each other. For example, when our women return from family leave, we help support them by delivering dinner to them during the transition back to the office. We also focus on developing policies such as the milk stork program which makes it easier for nursing moms to travel for business, and our recent addition of fertility and adoption benefits for the Bradley family."

## Forward movement

Women in professional services will continue to push for more leadership and management positions, equal pay standards, and board seats. NAWL reports that progress in law firms is slow; in the past ten years, the number of female equity partners at top law firms has barely increased, with few women earning as much as men or gaining upper management positions.

[Susan C. Freeman](#), Senior Vice President of Marketing & Business Development at [Jaffe](#), who trains lawyers to communicate effectively to develop relationships that result in new business, points to the fact that for men, communication is a way to negotiate power, seek wins, avoid failure and offer advice, but for women, it is a way to grow closer, seek understanding and find equality.

"By understanding the differences in communication styles between men and women, we can focus on equality and go beyond just diversity and inclusion – the center of our attention for so long," said Ms. Freeman. "All too often, the most commonly held gender

stereotypes get in the way of women's success in the workplace. Equity is the next big thing and firms focused on women's leadership initiatives are taking the first step in the right direction."

Law firms that support and encourage women lawyers through initiatives like these described here deliver better workplace environments with improved leave policies and flexible work arrangements, leading to greater job satisfaction as well as new business opportunities. As general counsel increasingly require women and diverse legal teams, it's high time for firms of all sizes to provide forums for women lawyers to have a voice, and know how to use it.

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*This article originally appeared in ALM's December 2018 issue of Marketing the Law Firm.*