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“There are so many opportunities, whether in-house or in law firms, for women to have really successful careers and be able to have a full, well-rounded life of work and family.”

— Ungaretti & Harris Partner Leslie Darling

Women see the value of networking

By Olivia Clarke

Only about 20 percent of the partners in Chicago’s largest law firms are female — a 2 percent increase since 2003.

These numbers are based on *Chicago Lawyer’s* 2008 diversity survey, which was sent to 200 Illinois law firms, and 92 firms responded. According to the survey, about 45 percent of the associates in these firms are women.

While times have improved for female lawyers, everything isn’t always equal when it comes to how business gets assigned and which opportunities are made available to them.

But many female lawyers don’t plan to wait for business and social connections to knock on their office doors. Instead, they have created formal and informal networking opportunities within their law firms and within the legal community so they can make connections, generate business, and learn from other women’s experiences.

They hope these networking groups will also increase the number of women who join and stay in the legal profession.

“Women face totally different challenges,” said Anita J. Wilson, vice president and chief employment counsel at TreeHouse Foods, Inc.

“The way they are perceived is totally different from how men are perceived.

“I think women should network so they can learn. I am not about reinventing the wheel. Rather than beat my head against the wall, I network with other women and figure out how they have done it.”

Networking matters

It’s not enough anymore to simply do good work, said E. Lynn Grayson, a partner at Jenner & Block.

Lawyers must do good work, and make sure others know about this good work. These ob-



(Top left photo) Ungaretti & Harris junior associates **Layla Strothoff** and **Jill Taylor** greet guests at the firm's women's wine tasting and networking event. Photo courtesy of Ungaretti & Harris. (Middle photo) **Nicole Nehama Auerbach**, of Valorem Law Group and a founder of the Coalition of Women's Initiatives in Law Firms, speaks at a coalition event where the Chicago Bar Association Alliance for Women's "Call to Action" initiative is discussed. Photo by David Durochik. (Bottom right photo) Jenner & Block associates **Grace S. Ho** and **Erinn L. Wehrman**, and partners **E. Lynn Grayson** and **Michelle M. McAtee** attend a Jenner & Block Women's Forum networking reception. Photo by Craig R. Skorburg.



"Networking is really a basis of developing your reputation, and building your brand as an attorney and a player in the larger legal community."

– Jenner & Block Partner **E. Lynn Grayson**

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jectives are more critical for female lawyers who, in some instances, are not working on a level playing field because of their gender, Grayson said.

“Many women attorneys would tell you that they still feel the need to be better, quicker, and faster,” she said. “Networking is really a basis of developing your reputation, and building your brand as an attorney and a player in the larger legal community.”

Grayson chairs Jenner & Block’s Women’s Forum, which was created to foster opportunities for professional, social, and personal growth for the firm’s female attorneys. It sponsors events that enhance professional development, networking, and self-promotion opportunities for women.

When young lawyers network, it helps people get to know them so they get considered the next time new business comes across a senior partner’s desk, or the next time a potential client wants a new lawyer, she said.

“Networking is all about becoming known, and becoming a player and making sure you position yourself to make a difference for yourself and your career,” she said.

It also gives everyone an opportunity to meet interesting people, make social connections and create an overall fuller life, Grayson said.

“I think the most challenging part, particularly for younger attorneys and sometimes senior attorneys, is, not everybody is naturally born with the skill-set to be a networker,” she said. “Networking skills are something that can be learned.”

Wilson, from TreeHouse Foods, said she does not typically flash her business card the moment she meets someone new. She likes to create a bond with someone first.

“I’m a kind of talkative person who always finds a connection with someone,” she said. “I was at an event where Lovie Smith was getting an award, and a woman and I started talking about how fabulous he looked.

“She is not a lawyer but works in compliance, and we became friends by talking about how good Lovie Smith looked. Now I’m able to call her when I have questions.”

Men and women network differently, she said.

Men, for example, like to hold large events or take people to dinner, while women tend to network on a more intimate or personal level, she said. For example, two women may move quickly from greeting each other to talking about how they handle their childcare.

“For men who are in law firms, I think, as they continue to work with women who are in-house, they need to think of different ways to network with women,” Wilson said. “I just got invited to a WNBA game, and you can bring your kids. I think that’s a great idea, and it was fun, fun, fun.”

Female lawyers cannot exist in a bubble, said Dorothy Capers, deputy corporation counsel for the City of Chicago. Networking helps people move forward in their careers, and can be a good resource when overcoming hurdles, Capers said.

Women often feel guilty about using their time to network. Many women would rather spend their time finishing a brief or handling their family’s needs, she said.

“I’ve often spoken on panels and told women to just do it,” said Capers, president of the Black Women Lawyers’ Association of Greater Chicago, Inc. “Don’t forsake your opportunity to network because you are trying to put other things in place. Sometimes it is more important to advance your career and build those relationships.”

Some female lawyers must still fight to get the best opportunities and salaries that are comparable to what their male counterparts receive, she said. Others say they are still hurt professionally by their desire to start families.

Women sometimes hurt themselves, Capers said, because of “our inability to get out there and brand ourselves, network ourselves, and make a name for ourselves, and really show what we are doing.”

Female lawyers need to support one another, and work together to break down barriers, said Deni Caplan, a principal and chair of the corporate, securities, and tax group at Goldberg Kohn. Networking helps women earn leadership roles, Caplan said.

An organization asked her many years ago to prepare a women’s networking event at a hockey game. But she said she didn’t feel that type of event would attract the greatest number

of women.

She and three other female partners brainstormed better ideas.

They pulled together some commonalities that women have, such as their desire to multi-task, and to participate in learning and charitable activities. They used these characteristics to create a women’s networking group within the firm called Engage.

Each of the group’s events has a networking, charitable, and educational component, Caplan said.

“I think networking is a bigger, more important part of every professional’s life,” Caplan said. “I think there are still some barriers to women being considered when networking opportunities come up that we need to continue to work through.”

Working together

Nicole Nehama Auerbach and Tara Kamradt started Katten Muchin Rosenman’s women’s initiative in 2004.

Over the years they discovered that women shared the same issues and questions as they attempted to build their firms’ women’s groups.

Auerbach, now a commercial litigator at Valorem Law Group, said they believed law firms could benefit from sharing information about their women’s initiatives.

They decided it would be beneficial to get those women who lead these initiatives together.

They hosted, in March 2007, a breakfast meeting with female representatives from as many law firms as possible, she said.

The interest expressed at that meeting led to the creation of the Coalition of Women’s Initiatives in Law Firms — a group of women from 30 law firms with offices in Chicago, she said.

The coalition provides a forum for communicating ideas and brainstorming greater ways to bring about change in the legal community. The group, which represents law firms of all sizes, also works with other women’s legal organizations.

It wants to help each firm enhance its recruitment, retention, and promotion of women lawyers, and supports the building, implementation, and continued relevancy of women’s

initiatives in law firms.

“When you realize that you are not alone and there are other people out there that you can reach out to and talk with, that is just very helpful,” said Marie Lona, a Winston & Strawn partner and member of the coalition’s steering committee.

“And then we can collectively get together, and share our wisdom as to what we are doing at our individual firms — what has worked really well and what hasn’t worked,” she said. “[We can] pull our knowledge together on speakers and resources so that we can collectively, as women lawyers, help all of us, no matter what firm we’re in, succeed to partnership and probably more importantly, leadership roles.”

Lona said the coalition provides female lawyers with the type of collaboration they cannot always find in their individual firms.

“Men easily are able to network within their own firms without even a thought because there are much more of them than there are of us,” she said. “I think that makes it more important for us to reach out to everyone within the community, as opposed to just within the firm, so that we get those same benefits. We can’t get that with the numbers that we have within our individual firms.”

Leslee M. Cohen, a principal at Much Shelist and a member of the coalition’s steering committee, said the coalition can help women’s initiatives share information and consider what the next step should be within their firms.

“Men tend to talk business as a regular topic,” Cohen said. “I will go out with my husband and another couple on a Saturday night and the men are talking business. The women don’t tend to do that, and a lot of women you go out with don’t work. It’s just not a natural topic.

“When you put women together in networking circles, we’re all there knowing that we want to help each other, we want to share business, we want to promote each other in a professional capacity, and it makes it much more comfortable to have those conversations.”

Kamradt, a partner at Katten, said the coalition provides an opportunity for change be-

cause it brings together women attorneys who want to make a difference, and want to succeed to leadership positions.

“My hope is that in 15 years there will not be a need for women’s initiatives in law firms because what I am starting to see happen, at least at Katten, is the women’s initiative is raising issues that affect everybody,” she said.

“The things we are addressing as a women’s initiative should be addressed firm-wide. These professional development issues, retention issues, firm training issues affect everybody, whether it’s the white male or the African-American ... Hopefully, in the future, firms will really be able to close that gap so that the investment made by firms in professional development is experienced by everyone on an equal basis.”

Auerbach hopes the coalition will help future female lawyers, and provide opportunities for female lawyers to influence change, suggest ideas and affect policy.

“We have come an amazingly long way, and we are on this warp speed to make change and to continue to solidify the change that has been made to date,” she said. “Obviously there is work to be done. My feeling is, it is a great time for women in law firms.”

Many women-centric groups exist in the legal community to try to influence change in law firms.

In early 2005, the Chicago Bar Association Alliance for Women invited Chicago law firms to join its “Call to Action,” a project that promotes women’s leadership in the legal profession.

“It’s the culmination of all the goals of the alliance to improve the percentage of women partners and women associates that start with large law firms,” said Kari Sheinfeld, first vice president and counsel for Corus Bank and co-chair of the alliance.

She said the alliance organizes events and other initiatives that support female lawyers in terms of career and business development, and in their involvement in social issues. It has addressed such issues as the challenges women and minorities face in law firms, and the struggles of a life-work balance, Sheinfeld said.

Some female lawyers say they get excluded from business development opportunities, Sheinfeld said. A female lawyer may be brought along for the official pitch because the firm wants to present a diverse team, but she may not be invited to more informal networking opportunities like client dinners or golf outings.

Some male partners feel more comfortable “bringing along” those who remind them of themselves — meaning other men, she said. Women need to find networking opportunities that allow them to meet a wide range of people.

“You have to consider it part of your job or career to do networking,” she said. “I was an associate at a large law firm and that was something I did not do then. I wasn’t involved in bar organizations and that, I feel, was a mistake.”

Creating opportunities

Sharon Calhoun, an associate at Barack Ferrazzano Kirschbaum & Nagelberg, said networking is important to her because it helps her create essential relationships.

She participates in her firm’s women’s committee and diversity committee, and helps with some of the firm’s community service projects.

“I think it is challenging being a female anything in a male-dominated, specifically historically male-dominated profession,” Calhoun said.

She recommends that lawyers get as involved as possible. Network with people not only inside the firm, but also throughout the business community, because that could lead to future clients, Calhoun said.

“The legal community in Chicago is not all that large, so it is better to start networking now with the peers you have,” she said. “Eventually someone will go in-house and they will think of you ...”

Networking helps newer female lawyers learn from more senior lawyers, said Jessica Perez Simmons, also an associate at Barack Ferrazzano.

“Some of the women before me had it a lot tougher and they have paved a path,” she said. “I think it would be advantageous for associ-

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ates to try to pick local lawyers' brains about, 'How did you get to where you are?'

"I definitely like meeting other people who are in the same situation as me. I like hearing about the different stories, and different experiences people have had."

Tara Devine, an associate at Salvi, Schostok & Pritchard, said her firm is flexible about allowing her to take time off for luncheons, and pays for her to attend seminars or referral meetings. If law firms are not supportive, then lawyers will more likely do the work that needs to be done, but not spend as much time growing the business, she said.

"Historically the trial field and attorneys in general have been pretty much male-dominated. Women have made a huge impact in the last couple years and even before that," she said. "A lot of times, the number of men clearly outnumbered the number of women in most firms. There are two female attorneys at my firm, and for a time period there was only one female attorney."

Devine recommends that women be each other's best cheerleaders. There can be a fine

line between being a strong, determined lawyer, and being someone perceived as pushy. The best female lawyers know where to be on that line without being vulnerable, she said.

"I'm very optimistic for the future of the female trial lawyer," Devine said. "If they take advantage of the resources around them, that will only lead to exceptional results for themselves, their peers, and their clients. You really have to be open to the opportunities that are around you."

Grayson, from Jenner & Block, said networking doesn't have to be thought of in a formal sense. It can be a group of law school friends or members of the condo board.

Networking doesn't have to just occur within the legal profession, said Capers, from the City of Chicago. She attended a women's conference that spanned across various professions, and she purposely attended a forum outside her profession so that she could learn how those women handle challenges.

Leslie Darling, a partner in the government group at Ungaretti & Harris, said, because of her practice, she often meets new people

through political events and business meals. She also tries to get to know people on a one-on-one basis.

"There are so many opportunities, whether in-house or in law firms, for women to have really successful careers and be able to have a full, well-rounded life of work and family," she said. "I think those opportunities are there. I think managing them in a law firm environment and work environment can be challenging, but possible."

When associates become partners they will need to know how to build their own business and reach out to new clients, she said.

"We have to do a great job educating our associates to keep up their contacts, and to not keep their heads down and just do their work for seven or eight years before they become a partner," she said.

"Don't say no to those opportunities to get in front of those clients," Darling said. "I think that firms, overall, need to do a good job at cultivating that so there is a next generation of partners at the firm who are able to generate business." ■