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The New York Times Blog “Shifting Careers”

September 29, 2008, 4:30 pm

Law Firms Get Rated on Female Friendliness

By [Marci Alboher](#)

Two weeks ago, on the same day that [Lehman filed for bankruptcy protection](#) more than 300 corporate lawyers showed up at the Mandarin Hotel in New York City for a luncheon honoring the winners of the second annual survey of best law firms for women sponsored by [Working Mother Magazine](#) and [Flex-Time Lawyers](#). The high attendance in the face of such economic turmoil suggested that work/life issues and the promotion of female lawyers has genuinely become a pressing business issue for the legal industry.

To give context to the survey’s findings, there was a panel discussion moderated by Claire Shipman, senior correspondent for “Good Morning America” that featured Thomas A. Mars, the general counsel of Walmart-Mart Stores, and Richard L. Revesz, the dean of New York University School of Law.

Last year, the big news was the very [existence of this survey](#).

This year, the survey — which bestows the title “best law firms for women” on 50 law firms that meet certain criteria — appears to have become a club many want to join. And why shouldn’t it be? If a firm makes it onto the list, its name appears throughout the current issue of [Working Mother Magazine](#), which happens to be distributed to law firm career planning offices just in time for the fall recruiting season. In an era where [law students](#) freely ask firms questions about the number of women being promoted to partner, policies on flexible work schedules, diversity, and general quality of life, surveys like this hold a lot of power.

Though it’s good that law firms are competing for a slot on this list, the survey’s results — and the panel discussion — show that firms still have a long way to go. Law students are divided roughly equally between men and women, yet the percentage of women drops to a mere 16 percent in the equity partnership ranks of law firms nationwide. To put some pressure on law firms to improve this number, this year’s survey asked participating law firms how many female lawyers were promoted to equity partnership positions over the prior five years.

“Revealing the gender gap for women equity partners is critical to demonstrating the relative lack of power and earning potential for women in law firms,” said Deborah Epstein Henry, the president of Flex-Time Lawyers. Among the 50 winning firms in the survey — and remember, these are the top national law firms — the average percentage of female equity partners is still just 19 percent.

Mr. Mars of Wal-Mart used the panel as an opportunity to showcase Wal-Mart's commitment to diversity, promotion of women and flexibility. He made the case that the company takes these issues seriously. He spoke passionately about moving millions of dollars of business away from law firms that don't meet Wal-Mart's standards for diversity and boasted that nearly all of the 165 members of Wal-Mart's legal department take advantage the company's flexible work policies in some way. He might have had the best quote of the afternoon, in explaining why lawyers should be able to work virtually and flexibly, when he said, "We're not running a fire department, we're running a law department."

On a less hopeful note, Mr. Revsesz, the N.Y.U. Law School dean told a story about trying to persuade the chairman of a big law firm that as long as lawyers were available to work on client matters late into the evening, it shouldn't matter whether they are still at their office desks or whether they are working from home after having dinner with their families. Apparently, Mr. Revsesz was unable to make any headway with the law firm partner, even with an example that involved working a 13-hour day.

Progress?