

Working Mother Magazine Names 50 Best Firms for Women

The Legal Intelligencer

By Gina Passarella

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Working Mother magazine and Flex-Time Lawyers have issued their first list of the 50 best law firms for women, and Pittsburgh firms made quite a showing.

Eckert Seamans Cherin & Mellott, K&L Gates and Reed Smith all made the list, which was presented in alphabetical order with no rankings in the August/September edition of the magazine.

Other firms with Pennsylvania offices on the list were Duane Morris, DLA Piper and Gibbons.

Deborah Esptein Henry, founder of Flex-Time Lawyers, said she believes in using competition as a catalyst for change, so she approached the editors of *Working Mother* about adapting its annual survey on the best places for women to work to look just at law firms.

The survey was tailored for the profession and greatly expanded, Henry said. A new survey was drafted, and six core categories were created. The survey looked at the work force profile, which consisted strictly of the numbers of women in various positions within the firm. It also looked at benefits and compensation, parental leave and related benefits, childcare, flexibility and retention and advancement opportunities.

Henry said an algorithm was created so that the 50 best firms were generated purely by the answers to the "yes/no," percentage and multiple choice questions on the survey. There were no judges.

The work force profile, flexibility and retention and promotion sections were weighted more heavily than the other three, Henry said. The survey included staff and attorneys, she said.

Henry said she didn't want firms to win simply because they had policies in place for the advancement of women in the firm. That was why the numbers of women in various positions was weighted heavily, she said.

Of the winning firms, not all had specific programs geared toward women. Of the ones that do, they are generally in the early stages. Leaders of these initiatives point to the importance of having support from the highest levels of leadership within the firm.

Eckert Seamans

Eckert Seamans didn't have a formal policy in place when it responded to the survey, but it does now, partner Wendy West Feinstein said.

What set the firm apart, she said, was the flexibility within the firm for lawyers and staff who are mothers.

"The firm historically has been informally very flexible," Feinstein said.

Eckert Seamans evaluates less on the number of hours spent in the office and more on the overall product. There's also no top-down approach to management, and practice group managers have the power to staff matters as they see fit, she said. That allows for more flexibility,

Feinstein said.

The firm decided to implement a specific program for women after Chief Executive Officer Tim Ryan saw the results of a survey that the gender bias subcommittee of the Allegheny County Bar Association completed.

The primary focus of the initiative is to assist female lawyers in business development and networking efforts. Feinstein is the chairwoman of the firm's associate committee and because 63 percent of the firm's associates are women, she said she would be working very closely with the heads of the new initiative.

Feinstein said she wasn't surprised that so many Pittsburgh firms made the list because Pennsylvania as a whole is a good place to raise a family. She said Pittsburgh specifically has a laid-back atmosphere.

Duane Morris

The women's initiative at Duane Morris is about 18 months old and focuses on enhancing professional development, marketing and mentoring opportunities for the firm's female attorneys.

Philadelphia partner Sharon L. Caffrey heads up the program, and she said the firm surveyed its partners at the outset to learn what they wanted out of the initiative. A lot of the responses, she said, were about a desire to have comfortable networking situations that weren't focused around sports or other traditional networking events.

When Duane Morris merged with Hancock Rothert & Bunshoft in January 2006, a speed-networking program was established to get some of the partners from both firms more quickly acquainted. Caffrey said the women's initiative, whose steering committee includes at least one attorney from Hancock Rothert, adapted the speed networking process for its female attorneys.

Caffrey said she thinks men just tend to network more with each other, whereas women may want to get home to their families.

"It is really designed to keep everybody in the loop," Caffrey said.

The initiative has a liaison in each office, and that person is responsible for setting up informal office meetings with the female attorneys to talk about office issues.

The firm already had a formal mentoring program for all associates, but Caffrey said the women's initiative might add to that informally.

Caffrey said having the support of top-level management is key to the success of the program, which has two marketing personnel dedicated to the group.

Reed Smith

Reed Smith partner Anne M. Devans is the second person to chair the firm's Women's Career Advancement Initiative. The firm has one of the longer-running women's programs, which started in 2003.

Devans said the initiative focuses mainly on business development and the advancement of the firm's female attorneys. Reed Smith teamed up with Catalyst - a New York nonprofit dedicated to advancing women in the workplace - to create career advancement workshops.

Reed Smith also holds marketing and networking events to get its female lawyers in front of existing and potential clients.

Devans said she is planning to get together the heads of all the firm's practice groups - both men and women - to discuss ways they can make sure these initiatives are working.

"One of the reasons that this initiative is successful is because of the senior level commitment we have," she said.

K&L Gates

There is no formal program geared toward women at K&L Gates, but there are initiatives that may have led to the firm making the list

Roslyn Pitts, the director of legal recruiting and professional development, said the firm's balanced-hours program probably had a lot to do with the firm's success in the survey.

It is available to both men and women, and offers flexible work arrangements as attorneys need them, she said. Attorneys apply for either reduced hours, flexible schedules or telecommuting.

There were several attorneys in the firm's part-time program that switched over to the balanced-hours program when it began in January 2006, she said. Most of the participants are women, and attorneys generally sign up for the program for family needs, Pitts said.

Aside from the balanced-hours program, Pitts said the firm also has "quite a few women in management," and a few women on management and executive committees.

More on the Survey

Firms could apply for the survey if they had 50 or more attorneys. The identities of the firms who did not make the list were kept confidential, and the decision not to rank firms was to encourage participation, Henry said. More than 200 firms registered for the survey, 90 completed it and the 50 were chosen from that group. Registration for the 2008 list opens today, Henry said.

Every firm that participated received a scorecard in terms of where they ranked on the individual questions. Each of the participating firms will be able to purchase a benchmarking report to see where they stand compared to other firms in terms of region and size.

"That's the critical next step," Henry said. "To improve, they have to know where they stand."