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How Much Will 'Best Law Firms for Women' List Influence Attorneys?

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Special to Law.com

Female law students entering the recruiting season now have another weapon for their interviewing arsenal: a list of the 50 U.S. firms deemed most woman friendly.

The inaugural 2007 Best Law Firms for Women list, a joint venture between *Working Mother* magazine and Flex-Time Lawyers, LLC, was the result of a national survey of approximately 200 law firms. According to survey co-creator Deborah Epstein Henry, founder and president of Flex-Time Lawyers, the hundreds of questions helped narrow the results to firms that were exceptional in their woman-friendly policies and practices.

"We didn't want to just have a firm recognized simply for having good policies in place; we wanted the numbers to support it as well," she says. The six-section survey behind the list covered benefits and compensation; parental leave and policies; child care; workforce profile (the concentration of women at different levels within the firm); flexibility, including flex-time; and the retention and advancement of women.

"The [latter] three [sections] were more weighted," says Henry. "We wanted to concentrate on those areas because we think the issues for women in those areas are more acute."

Henry hopes the list, which is unranked and is focused on firms with 50 or more employees, will spur a healthy rivalry in the industry to improve women-friendly policies. "I've seen women stalling in the profession, and I felt that one real way to create change in the profession is through competition," she says. "Because law firms are similarly structured and therefore easily comparable, I decided that creating a list for women would be a powerful tool to move the profession forward for progressing women."

Another aim of the list, according to Henry, is to empower female law students: "The list is going to the four reps of each of the top 100 law schools across the country, with the goal of using the list as the ultimate recruiting tool for women law students. It's an effective way to create a pressure point to change," she says.

Firms that made the cut are pleased to be in such progressive company. "It is tremendously gratifying to be on the list," says Karen Lockwood, a partner at Washington, D.C.-based Howrey and co-chair of her firm's Women's Leadership Initiative. "It's an important survey, and it's important for firms to be able to understand how they are positioned in terms of whether their practices are working."

Stacy Chen, an incoming third-year student at the University of Chicago Law School, says the list has given her perspective and prompted some questions to ask prospective employers. "For example, the percentage of female partners and equity and nonequity partners -- that's something that's not usually widely publicized," she says. "There's a lot of good information in the list. It can drive some questions at interviewing, and I think that signals to employers that this is an issue that people are sensitive about."

Some women working in the profession, however, question how much of an impact the list might have on a newly minted attorney's employment decisions. An environmental law attorney at a national public interest company who asked to remain anonymous says she doubts such a list would have been a factor for her when she left law school in 1995.

"I was very ambitious, and my priorities were wanting to go to a firm with a great reputation that would let me do pro bono and would pay me enough that my law school debts would be managed," she said. "I definitely looked at whether they had a good male/female ratio, and I chose law schools the same way -- it's not as if that didn't matter at all. But I was of the opinion that if I was going into a law firm saying, 'How are you going to accommodate me having a family?', they might not take me seriously and wouldn't develop me."

How about in 2007, when 40 to 50 percent of law school graduates are women?

"There are definitely other factors to consider, such as geography, practice areas and overall firm reputation," concurs Chen. "But [women-friendly policies] are also important for me. I'm a little on the younger side at 24, but the list is something I will keep handy as work-life balance becomes more important to me. I would like to start a family, so it's definitely something I'll keep in mind."

One thing the list reflects is how much the workplace has recently changed for women, says Suzanne Riss, editor in chief of *Working Mother* magazine. "Forget the old stereotypes of law firms as inhospitable to women," she says. "As *Working Mother* examined the practices of many of the nation's law firms, I was pleasantly surprised to discover that a number have been quietly changing their policies in recent years to reflect changes that are afoot in society as a whole."

Howrey's Lockwood said she's hearing positive feedback about the list from a variety of quarters, not just from well-read colleagues or those who are leaders in women's advancement issues. "There is a lot of attention right now in the marketplace that focuses upon wide-eyed examination and creative problem solving to bring work-life in general into a realistic framework, both for men and women, so the marketplace is warm for this," she says.

The list is just the tip of iceberg, says Henry, who is working on a report about trends identified during the survey and expects many more lists to come. "I've gotten numerous inquiries from firms that didn't participate and want to be considered for next year, and I've gotten tremendous excitement from not only the firms but from so many women nationally who thank us for moving the ball forward," said Henry. "The goal of this initiative is to create national benchmarking that hadn't previously existed. And what has been so gratifying has been the number of women lawyers who are saying, 'Thank you for getting the conversation started here.'"

C.C. Holland is a northern California-based freelance writer.

The 2007 Best Law Firms for Women

Alston & Bird, Atlanta
Armstrong Teasdale, St. Louis
Arnold & Porter, Washington, D.C.
Baker & Daniels, Indianapolis
Baker & McKenzie, Chicago
Bingham McCutchen, Boston

Blackwell Sanders, Kansas City, Mo.
Bryan Cave, St. Louis
Chapman and Cutler, Chicago
Covington & Burling, Washington, D.C.
Cravath, Swaine & Moore, New York
Debevoise & Plimpton, New York
Dickstein Shapiro, Washington, D.C.
DLA Piper US, New York
Dorsey & Whitney, Minneapolis
Duane Morris, Philadelphia
Eckert Seamans Cherin & Mellott, Pittsburgh
Farella Braun + Martel, San Francisco
Foley & Lardner, Milwaukee
Folger Levin & Kahn, San Francisco
Gibbons P.C., Newark, N.J.
Heller Ehrman, San Francisco
Hogan & Hartson, Washington, D.C.
Holland & Knight, New York
Howrey, Washington, D.C.
Hunton & Williams, Richmond, Va.
Ice Miller, Indianapolis
Katten Muchin Rosenman, Chicago
King & Spalding, Atlanta
Kirkland & Ellis, Chicago
Kirkpatrick & Lockhart Preston Gates Ellis, Pittsburgh
Kramer Levin Naftalis & Frankel, New York
Manatt, Phelps & Phillips, Los Angeles
Mayer, Brown, Rowe & Maw, Chicago
McDermott Will & Emery, Chicago
McGuireWoods, Richmond, Va.
Miller & Chevalier Chartered, Washington, D.C.
Mintz Levin Cohn Ferris Glovsky and Popeo, Boston
Morrison & Foerster, San Francisco
Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe, New York
Patton Boggs, Washington, D.C.
Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison, New York
Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman, New York
Reed Smith, Pittsburgh
Sidley Austin, Chicago
Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom, New York
Sonnenschein Nath & Rosenthal, Chicago
White & Case, New York
WilmerHale, Washington, D.C.
Womble Carlyle Sandridge & Rice, Winston-Salem, N.C.

Source: Working Mother magazine and Flex-Time Lawyers, LLC