

MBA leads the way in recognizing lawyers in transition

by Bill Archambeault

Some were recent law school grads seeking their first jobs as lawyers.

Some were experienced attorneys looking for tips on resuming full-time practice after taking time off to raise families or care for sick parents. And some were practicing attorneys in search of more flexible, better-paying part-time jobs.

In all, more than 50 people seeking a stronger connection to the legal profession attended the Massachusetts Bar Association's first Lawyers in Transition Conference, held May 3 at Bentley College in Waltham.

MBA Vice President Denise Squillante, who chairs the Lawyers in Transition Committee, said the turnout was impressive given that many of the attendees aren't active attorneys or MBA members.

"I think the conference was a raging success," Squillante said. "I was surprised at our ability to reach lawyers in transition in the hidden corners of the commonwealth. I think it shows we need to continue to reach out to lawyers in this category, because lawyer in transition issues are not going to go away."

The Lawyers in Transition Committee is going to be a "permanent fixture" under the new General Practice, Solo & Small Firm Section, she said.

She also wants the conference to become an annual tradition, alternating east-west locations with the annual General Practice, Solo & Small Firm Conference.

"Massachusetts is the leading bar associ-

ation on lawyer in transition issues,"

Squillante said, referring to keynote speaker Deborah Epstein Henry's assertion that the MBA is "the first bar association nationally to address these issues." Many, however, including the New York State Bar Association and the American Bar Association, are starting to take action, she said, but it's a situation that is only beginning to be recognized. Henry is the founder and president of Flex-Time Lawyers LLC in Philadelphia.

Referring to the MBA co-sponsored Equality Commission report on "Women Lawyers and Obstacles to Leadership" (see story, page 1) and other recent studies, Henry noted that transition issues affect a higher percentage of women than men. One recent study found that more than 40 percent of women lawyers leave the profession at some point in their careers.

"It shows that nearly half of all women lawyers follow an unconventional career path," said Henry.

The key to balancing a legal career and personal needs, she said, centers on lawyers recognizing their financial value to their firms and making it clear what those firms stand to lose if they don't meet a lawyer's needs for flexibility. One study, she said, estimated that it costs a firm \$500,000 to lose a second-year associate, and upper-tier associates present an even bigger retention problem to firms.

Henry said that when she decided to transition into consulting, she approached her boss at the firm where she was working and told him she was quitting. He told her

that her resignation was denied — which stunned her — and told her to come back with a plan that would allow her to stay with the company in a reduced capacity.

Her "dream proposal" was accepted, she said, because the company wasn't willing to lose her outright, and she urged attendees to recognize how valuable they are to a firm.

"What infuriates me is that so many people quit from a position of weakness," Henry said. "When are you ever in as good a position as when you're ready to quit?"

The same rule applies to those re-entering the profession, she said. Several conference speakers stressed that lawyers making a comeback often make the mistake of thinking that a potential employer will be doing them a favor by hiring them after a hiatus.

"To be effective in re-entering the profession, you need to be creative. It's also about sticking your neck out a little bit," Henry told the audience. "I see confidence being one of the biggest issues for women returning to work, and that leads to inertia."

Lawyers re-entering the profession need to stress what they can offer a firm, she said, but it can still be a struggle. It's important to do some research and find re-entry friendly firms.

"You are a square peg trying to fit yourself into a round hole," she said. "You need to make that process easy for the employer" and explain gaps in a resume, she added. "Treat your resume as a proposal — make it clear what you can offer."

While women who put their legal careers on hold to start a family may be the

most familiar face of a "lawyer in transition," men are also putting their careers on hiatus or seeking more flexible working conditions for a better work-life balance.

"To bring men into the discussion is really critical," Henry said. "To change things here, we really need to have everybody invested and not focus on it just as a women's issue."

Though in the minority, a number of men attended the conference, including at least one recent law school graduate and one experienced attorney who hasn't been practicing full time for more than 10 years.

Ryan Ciporkin, who graduated from law school in May, said he's had trouble landing an associate's position at a firm and has been doing some debt collection work for a larger firm and some contract work for an agency.

"It's been very challenging getting my first associate position," he said.

According to Squillante, one of the big issues now is helping lawyers find part-time work. "There are lawyers looking to work part-time and lawyers looking to hire part-time, but they can't seem to find each other."

In addition to future job-connection plans, Squillante said one successful effort already offered is the reduced membership fee of \$150 for lawyers in transition as a way of keeping lawyers informed about industry news, offering Continuing Legal Education courses to sharpen their skills and encouraging networking.

"Getting them those lifelines to the profession is important because I think they want to stay connected," Squillante said.



Photo by Merrill Shea

Attendees listen to keynote speaker Deborah Epstein Henry, founder and president of Flex-Time Lawyers LLC.



Photo by Bill Archambeault

MBA Vice President Denise Squillante, left, and keynote speaker Deborah Epstein Henry.