

Hogan Lovells International LLP

Progressing and retaining talented women initiatives

Increasing numbers of women are entering the legal profession. In 2011, Legal Week reported that women constitute 46% of solicitors with practising certificates and that females have represented the majority of law firms' trainees every year since 1999-2000. We have seen increasing numbers of women applying to the firm and joining us as trainee solicitors. As we are successful in attracting women to the firm, our initiatives focus on progressing and retaining these talented women. Monitoring of our diversity statistics tells us that whilst we recruit slightly more female than male trainees and maintain a broadly even split of male and female associates, a disproportionate number of men progress to senior levels. This is a recognised issue across the legal sector and one of our initiatives below aim to address.

Issue to be resolved

Underlying issues include management culture, approach to flexibility within the working environment and ensuring appropriate levels of support for our women at key stages in their careers.

The UK Law Society recently reported that flexibility in working practices is the single most significant obstacle to women reaching senior roles due to the juxtaposition of the partner track with the phase in a female lawyer's career when traditionally, though not always, she may be considering children. Flexibility is not only a gender issue, but a generational one and younger women, as well as younger men, entering the profession are unlikely to accept the current perceived all hours culture.

Senior Associate is the key career step prior to promotion to either Partner or Of Counsel. Our Senior Associate population therefore represents the next generation of leadership of the firm. Our monitoring of our gender statistics shows that our male and female attrition rates are proportionate up to the Senior Associate level but we then begin to lose a disproportionate number of our women between Senior Associate and Partner levels. Senior Associate is also the career stage at which women generally reach the age when they may start considering a family. Anecdotally, our female lawyers have stated that it can sometimes be difficult to initiate conversations about their options at this time due to potential negative inferences being drawn about a lack of commitment to their career.

Of our current London Partners who trained with us, the majority of both male and females were promoted to Partner at between six and eight PQE. On the assumption that they joined us directly from university with no career break, this would equate to making Partner between 30-32 years of age. This is the age when many women may be contemplating starting a family. Anecdotally, female lawyers have stated that this coincidence means it is better to wait to make Partner before considering raising a family. With the Partner track extending further and competition increasing this may not be a practical reality for many.

Action taken

To address these issues, we have reviewed our approach to flexible working and introduced two new mentoring programmes.

We have recently revised and re-launched our flexible working policies and practices to;

*Explicitly state that any employee may apply for flexible working at any stage in their career so deprioritising the focus on statutory caring responsibilities and removing our previous statutory stance to accept request per year

*Explicitly state within the policy that the firm welcomes all reasonable requests and will endeavour to accommodate such requests, including short term, transitory requests

*Utilise role models to encourage transparency of existing flexible working arrangements and the breadth of options available and already in place through the use of case study examples and by putting in place a group of Flexible Working Champions.

We have introduced a pilot of Senior Associate Mentoring. Each recently promoted London based female Senior Associate was offered a Partner mentor. Mentoring provides; an opportunity to discuss strategies which have helped more experienced lawyers to overcome barriers to career development regardless of any family intentions, provides a sounding board and opportunity for feedback from someone beyond their immediate environment, provides a confidential forum in which to raise sensitive issues such as decisions regarding family planning, provides access to role models (male or female) and is a means of increasing their network of contacts.

We have also introduced Maternity Mentoring. Maternity Mentoring is a means of supporting our talented female lawyers, and all our female employees, prior to, during and following the maternity period and therefore a means of maintaining a pipeline of potential, female future leaders in the firm.

Result

The response to this refreshed approach to our flexible working policy has been very positive.

We have had a 70% uptake to the pilot of our Senior Associate Mentoring though it is too soon to analyse its impact and success as yet.

Similarly, whilst we have received positive feedback with regards to our Maternity Mentoring programme, it is too soon to analyse its impact.

Next Steps

To maintain the momentum behind these initiatives, each Group Manager of our London practice areas will shortly hold a discussion group with their associates to solicit feedback on these initiatives, what we do well, and what more could be done to address the issues identified both at the firm and local group level.

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