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Glacial Change: Women in Law Firm & Corporate Leadership

Women achieved parity in law school classes more than three decades ago, yet the numbers today show that women are underrepresented in positions of power and influence in law firm and corporate legal environments. While there is evidence of improvement for women, what is at the heart of this glacial change?

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When women first achieved parity in law school classes and at the junior-associate level approximately three decades ago, some assumed that they would rise through the ranks and, over the course of the next decade or two, move toward equality among senior associates, nonequity partners and, eventually, firm owners.

But 30 years later, that degree of hoped-for progress hasn't materialized. The "[2020 Survey Report on Promotion and Retention of Women in Law Firms](#)," published by the National Association of Women Lawyers (NAWL), found that female attorneys comprised 47 percent of all associates, but 31 percent of nonequity partners and 21 percent of equity partners. For women of color, the drop-off was even steeper: 22 percent of associates (including 10 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, 6 percent Hispanic/Latinx, and 5 percent Black), 4 percent of nonequity partners, and 3 percent of equity partners.

According to the NAWL survey, women have sustained (albeit small) improvement among equity partners since the survey's inception, up from 15 percent in 2006 to 19 percent in 2020. According to the report, this is a positive trend toward a more

inception, up from 13 percent in 2000 to 15 percent in 2020. According to the report, this is a positive trend toward a more representative legal profession, but change at this glacial pace will continue to result in future generations of lawyers entering a profession in which women and diverse attorneys are underrepresented in positions of power and influence.

The same picture comes into focus regarding women in law firm leadership roles, according to the NAWL survey. Female lawyers made up 28 percent of governance committee members, 29 percent of compensation committee members, 19 percent of firm-wide managing partners, 28 percent of office managing partners, and 25 percent of practice group leaders.

And the backdrop is similar close to home, according to the "[Law Firm Equity Initiative – 2021 Report](#)," published by the Institute for Women's Leadership at Marquette University, which included responses from 29 Milwaukee-based firms comprised of at least 10 attorneys and at least one female attorney.

Women were 44.1 percent of junior associates and 45.3 percent of mid-level associates – but that slid to 32.6 percent of senior associates, 22.6 percent of nonequity partners, and 20.7 percent of equity partners. The percentage of women who stay at a firm for five to nine years is 25.5 percent, and for 10 to 14 years is a virtually identical 25.3 percent – but that number plummets to 11.9 percent beyond 15 years, the report found.

These statistics raise a number of questions: Why don't we see more women in law firm leadership? Why are women of color facing an even less encouraging picture? How can law firms create more supportive cultures? What's the business case for moving more women into leadership? And what advice do female legal leaders have for their more junior counterparts?

We talked to a number of law firm, corporate, and industry leaders who have a pulse on what's happening in Wisconsin and nationwide. What follows are highlights of more than a dozen telephone interviews. (See sidebar, "[Meet Our Roundtable Participants](#).")



Margaret "Peggy" Kelsey is executive vice president, general counsel & corporate secretary at WEC Energy Group, Milwaukee. She also oversees WEC's environmental group. "Those of us in corporations are in hot pursuit of meeting diversity objectives," she says. "As it becomes easier for clients to choose law firms not in their city, you're going to find clients who have a very strong diversity focus lose patience with their law firms."

How would you characterize the overall progress that women have made toward law firm and corporate leadership ranks?

Andrea Schneider, Institute for Women's Leadership, Marquette University: When I graduated [from] law school in 1992, we were told that the fact that you didn't see women in law firm leadership was a pipeline issue. It's now been almost 30 years, and that excuse just doesn't work. After 25 years of seeing law students graduate, the narrative of why we don't see more women in leadership hasn't changed much. And it is still, frankly, blaming women. "They choose to leave because they love their kids." But I haven't met a lot of guys who don't love their children. "Women lateral into government and in-house" is another excuse given for the lack of progress in law firm ranks. But it's not that [those] other areas of law are more highly representative.

Michele Perreault, DeWitt Law Firm, Madison: The numbers tell us that perhaps we've made some advancements, but we're not making nearly as much advancement as we should. Anywhere you look, whether Wisconsin, nationally, or internationally, while we start with almost equal numbers of law students and graduates, each step we go up, the number of women to men is reduced. I'm

very hopeful that we will see substantial improvement over the next five years. But you have to be intentional.

Margaret “Peggy” Kelsey, WEC Energy Group, Milwaukee: We haven’t seen as much change as I thought we would have. You’re seeing pockets of improvement. You see women in various leadership roles, but they are often things like recruiting or summer associate programs, as opposed to partner compensation. Those of us in corporations are in hot pursuit of meeting diversity objectives. At some point, it dawned on me that, “Peggy, you’re the client. You have some say in this.”

I started a conversation among general counsels in southeast Wisconsin. A subset of us said, “Is there a role for us to play collectively?” as opposed to each of us pointing to our outside law firms and saying, “We want our team to be diverse.” We thought, maybe we should have client-side GCs get together with law firms as a group to discuss how we can work together to support women in leadership.

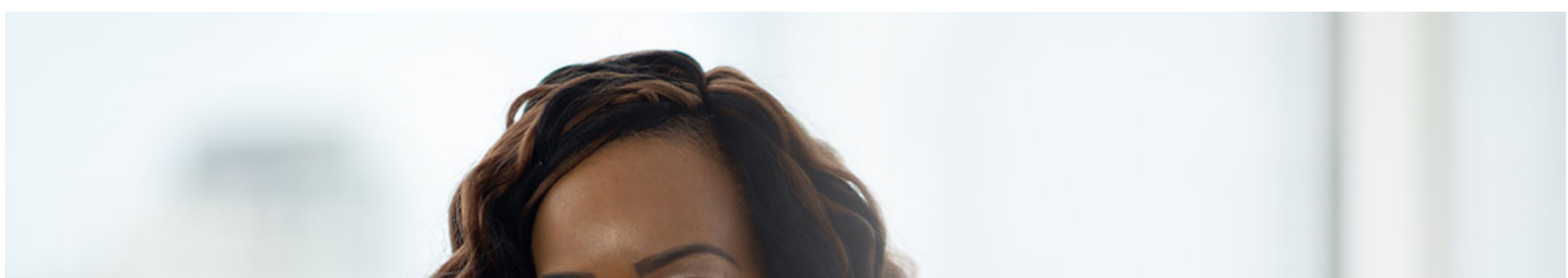


Susan E. Lovern is president and CEO of von Briesen & Roper s.c. It’s important to make sure that you are hiring enough women, and a diverse population, she says, so that your pipeline is filled with different avenues for talent. “And then keep an open mind about bringing diverse perspectives into leadership positions at the firm.”

Sharon Meit Abrahams, Legal Talent Advisors: It’s really sad that 30 years ago, we were still having the same exact conversations that we’re having now. Have things improved? You can look at the numbers. It’s so slight that they don’t make any sense. When you look at leadership in law firms, it’s not inclusive. [Leadership] may have better representation [than in decades past], but a policy doesn’t change a behavior. When you pull back the curtains, the behaviors haven’t changed. Women are not encouraged to take on leadership roles.

Sherry Coley, Davis|Kuelthau S.C., Green Bay: There are more women becoming law firm partners, but it’s going to require being more open-minded and making sure that not just women, but people of all classes, colors, religions, sexual orientations are given opportunities, especially in a Biglaw context. I’m very conscious of whom I’m giving opportunities to, as far as working on my clients and my cases, and whom I’m giving kudos and recognition to.

Emery Harlan, MWH Law, Milwaukee: I would characterize the progress as moderate – it hasn’t been a snail’s pace, but it hasn’t been robust. Women who are in a position to control where business is sent have been more willing to assert their influence to make sure that law firms they work with provide a fair opportunity to progress and do work at the highest levels. While there has been progress in terms of getting women elevated, obviously the legal profession, like the business world, in general, is still disproportionately male-dominated. As a result, the institutions still reflect a male perspective on how they’re organized and the kinds of behaviors they incentivize.





DeVona Wright Cottrell is chief legal officer and general counsel at GMR Marketing. “We need to look at who we’re hiring, where we’re getting that talent from, how we are interviewing, where we’re getting our referrals coming from, and whether there are biases built into those practices,” she says. “Women and people of color really want to align with organizations that are aligned with us. It’s not just important that you would hire me, but I feel I could be part of the fabric of the organization and be included in opportunities.”

Deanne Koll, Bakke Norman S.C., New Richmond: Candidly, when there are no other women in management or leadership, that is a deterrent for women. It’s similar to the diversity discussion. It takes a certain personality to go into business with five other men. That’s what I chose to do, but I think many other women would say, “Nah, no thanks.” When I decided to become a partner, that’s what I knew I was getting myself into, without any other women to support me.

Scott Hansen, Reinhart Boerner Van Duren s.c., Milwaukee: Overall, there’s been a gradual uptick of women in positions of leadership. It’s commonplace to see women in the courtroom, on the bench, in places of responsibility. But when you look at the senior ranks, there’s a lot of room for continued improvement.

The pandemic has been very hard, particularly on women lawyers. I talked to a few of my younger shareholders who have families, who have a number of their friends who have had to drop out of the workforce as lawyers.

Why should law firms care about retaining women and advancing them to positions of leadership?

Peggy Kelsey: Part of the challenge is that law firms traditionally have not viewed themselves as businesses – they’re amalgamations of professionals. Their clients are increasingly uncomfortable about the lack of diversity at law firms. As it becomes easier for clients to choose law firms not in their city, you’re going to find clients who have a very strong diversity focus lose patience with their law firms. I’m not one who pushes metrics on my outside counsel and says, “You must do X, Y, and Z.” I’m more of a collaborator. This shouldn’t be a one-way street. A rising tide lifts all boats here.

Emery Harlan: You’re seeing women reach the highest levels outside of the legal profession. It makes sense for law firms to put in this extra effort to demonstrate to their own clients and prospective clients that they take the issue of gender equity very seriously. Women disproportionately make up the juries in this country, so it makes sense to have women as meaningful participants on trial teams to help their clients and help their partners communicate in a way that their message resonates.

Andrea Schneider: If you look at business, and corporate boards, we used to hear the same story. Now, you don’t see companies arguing that they’re putting women on their boards to be nice or that it’s going to hurt their bottom line. My goal is to have a similar narrative in law. Diversity of experiences and opinions in leadership has been demonstrated to lead to better decision-making. Moreover, turnover costs a lot of money. You’re losing all this talent that you’ve trained. And, as much as I like golf, you’re eliminating 50 percent of your clients if your only way to meet clients is on the golf course with three other guys.





Andrea Schneider is a professor of law and director of the Institute for Women's Leadership at Marquette University. She recently published the "Law Firm Equity Initiatives – 2021 Report," which looked at the number of women in leadership in Milwaukee's largest law firms. "You don't see companies arguing that they're putting women on their boards to be nice or that it's going to hurt their bottom line," she says. "My goal is to have a similar narrative in law."

Susan Lovern, president and CEO, von Briesen & Roper s.c., Milwaukee: It's pretty well established that boards that have a more diverse makeup make better business decisions. It's increasingly apparent that our clients and our communities expect us to reflect the demographics of the population, so that we can provide the best service and make the best decisions and understand the needs of our clients and communities.

Sherry Coley: We would be extremely short-sighted if we didn't look at all the statistics for corporate America. There are enough studies to show the business case for diversity, including gender diversity, the ability to generate more revenue and profits, the ability to have greater productivity and satisfaction on the job – this has been studied for years. Law firms are a business like any other business. Our clients are diverse. If we want to understand and connect with the businesses who are our clients, then we have to [diversify leadership].

DeVona Wright Cottrell, GMR Marketing, New Berlin: When you have a broad spectrum from diverse backgrounds and experiences, the outcomes or outputs are better and more robust. There's a ton of research that talks about [the fact that] businesses that are more diverse are more profitable. It's because of the various perspectives people bring. It's a client expectation now. And firms should care because we want sustainability; we want to continue to innovate; we want clients to continue to be attracted to us. Diversity is very much tied to positive financial performance.



Michele L. Perreault is managing partner of DeWitt LLP's Madison office. Statistically, she says, women are typically in charge of the firm's DEI committee and pro bono work. "Then if you compare that to who is on the executive committee, the board of directors, senior management – that's where they're not. We have to break that. Your law firm has to look at the cold, hard facts, and stop making excuses."

Michele Perreault: We have to bring in young, talented attorneys, and we have to adjust to the lifestyle changes and choices that the younger generation is making, that in the past were considered traditionally female desires, like work-life balance. When I first became a lawyer in 2003, I was startled by the number of male attorneys who would come to work the day after their wife had a child. It was almost like a badge of honor. None of our male associates have done that in easily the last 10 years.

Deanne Koll: Do we think we attract business or get clients as a result of having women in leadership roles? Our firm is not large enough to have clients that are demanding that we show our diversity before they hire us. We don't have Microsoft as a client. We're too small for that issue to arise.

Tom Schumacher, Bakke Norman S.C., New Richmond: Having different viewpoints, different perspectives, different age demographics, all of those from a business perspective are a benefit to the firm. Diversity provides more ideas, and it challenges ideas that are already there, whether those are the correct paths to follow. That diversity of opinion and diversity of viewpoints is what business is all about.



Dr. Sharon Meit Abrahams is president of Legal Talent Advisors. She believes women have to start owning their own successes. "Women tend to say 'we' rather than 'I.' The things I did, I did," she says. "Also, what needs to change is that when policies and procedures are implemented, firms need to get feedback on how well those things are running. They have to make sure that women get that challenging work so they get a chance to shine. Sponsor them, and get them in front of clients."

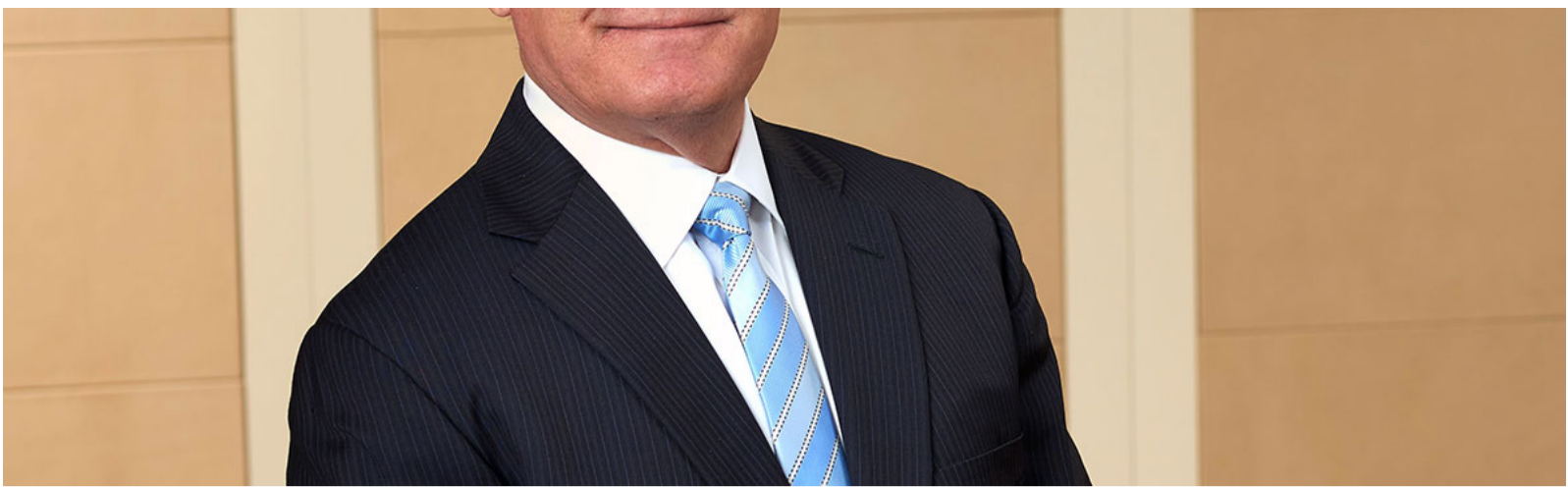
How are women lawyers of color faring vis-à-vis the overall female population?

DeVona Wright Cottrell: The change [both for women in general and women of color specifically] has been slow and incremental. It's happening, but not at a rate that's going to be impactful. There's been an increase in women and people of color in equity partnerships of 5 percent in the past 15 years. If your rate of return in your finance portfolio was 5 percent in 15 years, you would change advisers. Some things that contribute to [greater diversity] are awareness around unconscious bias related to women and people of color and developing programs and initiatives to address that. Where we fail is, a [DEI] program is just that. It's a program for a point in time. We need to ingrain diversity, equity, and inclusion into all of our practices.

Andrea Schneider: Women of color find even more challenges in both seeing themselves in leadership and in being supported, in finding mentors. It's still possible to have a "bro" culture when firms are racially diverse. It's possible to have a more gender-equitable law firm that pretends not to see race and is completely unwelcoming. That's a double burden on Black women in the workplace, and it's not at all unique to law firms.

Susan Lovern: It's important that firms lean in to diversity, equity, and inclusion, specifically on the inclusion side, so that everybody feels a sense of belonging, especially if there might not be significant numbers of women of color present. It's something you have to keep front of mind and work on.





Scott W. Hansen is of counsel to the litigation practice at Reinhart Boerner Van Duren in Milwaukee. Throughout his career, he has made a point of mentoring female attorneys, even when he was not their direct supervisor. “It’s commonplace to see women in the courtroom, on the bench, in places of responsibility,” he says. “But when you look at the senior ranks, there’s a lot of room for continued improvement.” He advises women to look for colleagues “who will give you opportunity and will share the credit with you or give credit to you, when you’ve earned it, so that people will see you as successful.”

Michele Perreault: When we’re looking at being intentional for gender diversity, we have to look at being intentional across the board, starting early on, and doing whatever we can to expand diversity in all areas. Social inequality is on everybody’s radar for all sorts of reasons and across all types of businesses. It most definitely is on law firms’ radar.

Sharon Meit Abrahams: Women of color take a double hit. It’s an uphill battle. There are definitely women of color who have opened their own businesses. You see them in family law, you see them in litigation, and in more community-based law. Good for them, because they’re finding a place for themselves by creating a place for themselves. The people who work with women of color need to change – from how they speak to the person, to the assignments they give.

Emery Harlan: All of the issues facing women are applicable to women of color, but then you put on the overlay of the whole racial dynamic, which makes it more difficult for them to find people who can be mentors, who can be sponsors. Even though they may have gender in common with other women who are not of color, it makes it challenging to build that kind of relationship that will lead to a mentor [or] sponsorship.



Deanne M. Koll is co-managing partner with Tom Schumacher at Bakke Norman. When Schumacher steps down as part of the firm’s succession plan, Koll will serve as the first female managing partner in the firm’s 36-year history. “Candidly,” Koll says, “when there are no other women in management [or] leadership, that is a deterrent for women. It’s similar to the diversity discussion.”

Why are so many women leaving their law firms mid-career, and what do firms need to do to improve their female retention?

Andrea Schneider: Most women are working very hard and not reaping the rewards. I don't think you can explain the deep drop-off with only the fact that there are kids to take care of. You've got to examine who's getting promoted, who's getting billing credit, who's getting mentored, and what is the climate on the ground. That takes a level of honesty and reflection that is often uncomfortable. There are firms that are known for not only hiring women but retaining women. There are best practices. It takes effort and awareness and culture change. Firms need to think about, "What value is this person going to bring to the firm over the course of their career?"

Susan Lovern: It's about making sure that you are hiring enough women, and a diverse population, so that your pipeline is filled with different avenues for talent. And then keep an open mind about bringing diverse perspectives into leadership positions at the firm. We've learned over the course of the past 18 months that some of the prior barriers don't need to be barriers. Law firms can and should be able to provide the flexibility that allows women, or anyone serving in caretaking roles, to work a flexible schedule, so that they can succeed both in the law firm and in taking care of other personal needs and responsibilities. And it's about being flexible in your promotion and compensation models, not a one-size-fits-all approach.

DeVona Wright Cottrell: We need to look at who we're hiring, where we're getting that talent from, how we are interviewing, where we're getting our referrals coming from, and whether there are biases built into those practices. Women and people of color really want to align with organizations that are aligned with us. It's not just important that you would hire me, but I feel I could be part of the fabric of the organization and be included in opportunities. It's one thing to be invited to the party; it's another to be asked to dance.

White males wield the power and the purse. We need them to be very intentional allies for women and people of color. Invite us to your client meeting. Make those introductions for me. The needle is not going to move if that does not happen.



Emery K. Harlan is an equity partner at MWH Law in Milwaukee and Chicago. He was named as the State Bar of Wisconsin's 2018 Lifetime Innovator for his efforts to broaden diversity within the profession. "All of the issues facing women are applicable to women of color, but then you put on the overlay of the whole racial dynamic, which makes it more difficult for them to find people who can be mentors, who can be sponsors," he says. "Even though they may have gender in common with other women who are not of color, it makes it challenging to build that kind of relationship that will lead to a mentor [or] sponsorship."

Michele Perreault: Statistically, women are typically in charge of the firm's DEI committee and pro bono work. Then if you compare that to who is on the executive committee, the board of directors, senior management – that's where they're not. We have to break that. Your law firm has to look at the cold, hard facts, and stop making excuses, stop saying, "It's their choices, what are we supposed to do?"

At DeWitt, we had to be brutally honest and look at what we can do differently to encourage women to get over that hump. We've created a part-time partnership program. We've increased maternity and paternity leave. We have a more formalized mentoring program. We've got a women attorneys' group to have discussions, share ideas, and just have fun with each other.

Sharon Meit Abrahams: Women have to start by owning their own successes. Women tend to say "we" rather than "I." The things I did, I did. Also, what needs to change is that when policies and procedures are implemented, firms need to get feedback on how well those things are running. They have to make sure that women get that challenging work so they get a chance to shine. Sponsor them, and get them in front of clients. Take them to the country club. Support them in their pitch to become a leader.

Deanne Koll: The ABA has a multiyear commission to try to figure that out – the root causes for women leaving the practice at the height of their careers. They have a Grit & Growth Mindset Challenge based on some research that shows, in order to keep women in the profession, we need to increase their resilience and their grit. On the one hand, it's offensive: "You just need to toughen up, women." But, if that's the truth of the research, let's accept that and try to do something better.

The four things the ABA commission identified are success fatigue, an elevated glass ceiling, sexual harassment, and implicit bias. I don't know that I think those are, anecdotally, true. This firm started in 1985, and I'm the second female partner the firm has ever had. I don't think that's because the firm didn't appropriately elevate female lawyers. The female lawyers the firm had either left the practice or left Bakke Norman. Women never stayed around long enough to get to that position.

Emery Harlan: There needs to be a reimagination of these legal institutions and what it means to be successful, so it is not all driven by metrics that benefit men, who, realistically, don't have the same, in general, responsibility inside and outside of work that women, in general, have. The most basic example is, if you have a 2,000-billable-hour requirement on top of nonbillable requirements, that puts a major strain on women who may have primary child-care responsibilities. To the extent that's the measure of success at a law firm – irrespective of the quality of work a woman may be providing, and teamwork and being collaborative, and what have you – you're going to see disparities in terms of who gets to rise to positions of power and who gets the benefit of client relationships and so on.



Sherry Coley is managing shareholder at Davis|Kuelthau S.C.'s Appleton and Green Bay offices. "There are more women becoming law firm partners, but it's going to require being more open-minded and making sure that not just women, but people of all classes, colors, religions, sexual orientations are given opportunities, especially in a Biglaw context," she says. "I'm very conscious of whom I'm giving opportunities to, as far as working on my clients and my cases, and whom I'm giving kudos and recognition to."

What advice do you have for aspiring female leaders? What do you wish you had known earlier in your career?

DeVona Wright Cottrell: Raise your hand early and often. Do it even if you're scared. Volunteer yourself for stretch assignments. Women have a unique perspective to bring to the table, and it's very much valued and appreciated, so leverage it. Understand that becoming more inclusive and diverse is a journey. It's not a race.

Sherry Coley: It takes time to understand that your voice matters, and you do have value to provide, and that you shouldn't always wait your turn to share your comments. If they're for the good of the order, have the courage to say those comments. Most people, and most guys, do want what's best for the group. That includes a lot of different people giving their input.

Andrea Schneider: For both men and women, the practice of law is a marathon, not a sprint. They should look over their life and career and recognize that their childbearing or parenting years are pretty narrow, and they should understand that's not all of their career. I do worry about people who step out of the practice, and the challenge of stepping back in, versus figuring out how to juggle everything for a very exhausting, comparatively short period of time. I wish I'd had more role models ahead of me saying: "Balance is important, and you can't be good at everything, all the time."

Susan Lovern: I would tell women who are interested in taking on leadership roles to look for opportunities to do so and to volunteer and speak up for those

opportunities. You need to find not just one mentor, but several mentors. There are many different facets to being a leader, so it's helpful to find different stakeholders to support and advise you along the way.



based freelance writer.

Michele Perreault: Guys who are now 50, 60 years old made their way in their careers by working ridiculous hours, very frequently entertaining clients on weekends and nights, and spending huge amounts of time building their network. Instead of dinner, invite people to lunch. Instead of drinks, have coffee with them in the morning. Spending five hours playing golf is not necessary to land clients. It's about getting out of that lockstep, "This is what worked for those people. This is what I have to do." That's also a message that senior leadership needs to give.

Emery Harlan: Don't be dissuaded by stereotypes, in terms of being expressive of what your goals are and seeking out the opportunities you really care about. Developing your personal board of advisors is super important – people from different backgrounds, male-

female, minority-nonminority – who give you hard, candid feedback in terms of things you need to get better at.

Scott Hansen: Look for opportunities. Look for colleagues who will give you opportunity and will share the credit with you or give credit to you, when you've earned it, so that people will see you as successful.

Peggy Kelsey: Realize that there's nothing you can't do. Don't have someone tell you, "You don't want to go into XYZ practice." Pursue it, and be a full member of the team. If you don't ask, you don't get. Women sometimes have that issue, where we'll wait to be asked to do something. And don't hesitate to take a left turn – left turns brought me to where I am today.

All-Women Fox Valley Firm Succeeds – Their Way



Jennifer Thompson (seated), Rebecca Castonia (upper left), Colleen Bissett (upper right)

When **Jennifer F. Thompson**, Suffolk 1994, started practicing in 1998 in Oshkosh, she was one of only eight female lawyers in Winnebago and Outagamie counties, one of two practicing family law, and the only one practicing criminal law in the private sector.

Thompson got plenty of calls right from the get-go, simply because people wanted a female lawyer in one of those areas. She joined forces with another woman attorney, and they practiced together for 23 years before the latter became a judge. Three other partners have since joined what is now Thompson, Bissett & Castonia LLP, based in Oshkosh.

In the intervening years, Thompson has observed a "revolutionary change" in the numbers of (mostly younger) women she encounters at court, a tally she believes has become "almost equal," although she can't attest as to how consistently women have moved into leadership ranks at other firms. With three female partners and 10 staff, women make up the entire leadership at Thompson, Bissett & Castonia LLP.

“The reason I went out on my own is that I was pregnant, and when you’re working at a firm, you’re tied to the firm,” she says. “You can’t have the flexibility you need. Four of us had kids around the same time, and we made sure we could be at every baseball game.”

Thompson, Bissett & Castonia LLP handles finances differently from many firms, which helps foster a “do-it-your-own-way” culture. “We don’t pool all of our money,” Thompson explains, aside from common expenses like a receptionist or malpractice insurance. “All of us have individual bank accounts. ... I don’t care when they work; they don’t care when I work. There’s never any bad feelings that, ‘I worked more than you,’ as long as they can cover their overhead.”

Her advice to younger female attorneys is to work twice as hard as their male colleagues. “It’s very stereotypical but true,” she says. “In this part of the state, in particular, it’s a little more good-ole-boy. It’s definitely gotten a lot better than when I was first working here. ... Find a mentor, in your firm or not, who has your best interests at heart.”

Meet Our Roundtable Participants

Susan E. Lovern, Iowa 1995, president and CEO, von Briesen & Roper s.c. (with seven offices in Wisconsin and one in Chicago), joined the firm 27 years ago as a summer associate. Over the years, she served on the firm’s compensation committee, chaired the recruiting committee for nine years, and served on its board of directors before reaching the firm’s top spot.

When Lovern’s kids were younger, she went part time for four years then came back full time but worked a day or two at home. The all-male board at the time was “quite supportive of the notion that if you have made the investment in the firm, and you do good work and get the job done, there’s no need for rigid expectations,” says Lovern. When it was time to select a new CEO in 2019, “It was a natural progression.”

Andrea Schneider, Harvard 1992, professor of law and director of the Institute for Women’s Leadership at Marquette University, has run the school’s nationally ranked dispute resolution program for more than 20 years.

Earlier this year Schneider published the “Law Firm Equity Initiatives – 2021 Report,” which looked at the number of women in leadership in Milwaukee’s largest law firms. The study showed that less than 10 percent of top earners at 29 responding firms, representing data for 1,108 attorneys, are women.

“My motivation for doing this study came from watching the remarkable progress that companies in Wisconsin have made in the last few years in terms of [placing women on their boards](#). Inspired by what transparency and peer pressure has accomplished in the corporate world, I hope that we can hold a mirror to our legal community and ask what we can do better,” she says.

DeVona Wright Cottrell, U.W. 1999, chief legal officer and general counsel at GMR Marketing, received an MBA at U.W.-Milwaukee and worked in a series of in-house and law firm positions, advancing by finding mentors and putting herself out there for “stretch assignments” that showcased her abilities. Cottrell joined GMR in 2020, after serving as director and associate general counsel for Robert W. Baird & Co. for nearly 13 years and partner of Gonzalez Saggio & Harlan LLP for five years.

“What I learned as a lawyer is that no one can take away your brainpower,” she says. “The more you know, the better you’re able to represent internal and external clients.”

Michele L. Perreault, U.W. 2003, joined DeWitt Law Firm nearly 20 years ago as a law clerk, successfully working her way to managing partner of the firm’s Madison office earlier this year.

Over the years Perreault volunteered for committee assignments, both in the firm, on nonprofit boards, and for the State Bar of Wisconsin, and then began being asked more frequently to join leadership efforts. As DeWitt grew in number of lawyers and expanded to four locations, the firm changed its management structure to include a managing partner in each of its four offices (including Milwaukee, Green Bay, and Minneapolis) and a president who would be chief executive. “I was asked to step in to manage the largest office, and perhaps foolishly during a pandemic, I said, ‘Sure.’”

Margaret “Peggy” Kelsey, Georgetown 1989, executive vice president, general counsel & corporate secretary, WEC Energy Group, Milwaukee, interned at Quarles & Brady during both law school summers and was taken under the wing of the lead product liability defense partner the second summer. She ultimately worked her way up to partner while having three children, then went in-house with a client, Modine Manufacturing Company, which encouraged her to get an MBA at U.W.-Milwaukee. She received that degree before assuming new executive responsibilities.

Kelsey came to WEC in 2017 as executive vice president and assumed responsibilities for general counsel and corporate secretary in January 2018 and as compliance officer in August 2021. She says, “Those of us in corporations are in hot pursuit of meeting diversity objectives. At some point, it dawned on me that, ‘Peggy, you’re the client. You have some say in this.’”

Kelsey also oversees WEC’s environmental group.

Sherry Coley, Marquette 2003, managing shareholder, Davis|Kuelthau S.C., Appleton and Green Bay offices, spent her career practicing in smaller offices of larger firms, starting with transactional work before “making the leap to litigation.” As a commercial and intellectual property litigation attorney, Coley was selected as the Appleton and Green Bay regional managing partner in January 2021.

Coley came to Davis|Kuelthau in 2015, serving on the firm’s board since 2019. She also has served in a number of State Bar of Wisconsin leadership positions, including secretary, chair of the Board of Governors and the Finance Committee, and president of the Young Lawyers Division.

Coley credits hard work and solid mentors for her career advancement, and she wonders if women are quick enough to articulate their strengths. “I don’t know if my path is typical, but I haven’t gotten lost so far,” she says.

Deanne M. Koll, William Mitchell 2006, is co-managing partner with **Tom Schumacher**, U.W. 1980, the last of the original partners of Bakke Norman, which has four offices in northwest Wisconsin (New Richmond, Baldwin, Eau Claire, and Menomonie). Koll joined the firm in 2006, practicing creditors’ rights, secured transactions, and business litigation. When Schumacher steps down as part of the firm’s succession plan, Koll will serve as the first female managing partner in the firm’s 36-year history.

For now, Koll says, “Tom and I have complementary strengths. It has worked well. It’s made for a nice management marriage.”

Dr. Sharon Meit Abrahams is president of Legal Talent Advisors. After nearly 30 years as a legal talent development expert in Biglaw, Abrahams started Legal Talent Advisors to help firms of all sizes improve their productivity and profitability. She says, “Women have to start by owning their own successes. Women tend to say, ‘we,’ rather than, ‘I.’ The things I did, I did.”

Abrahams formerly served as director of professional development and diversity and inclusion at Foley & Lardner. She also served as director of professional development for both Greenberg Traurig and McDermott Will & Emery.

Emery K. Harlan, U.W. 1989, equity partner at MWH Law in Milwaukee and Chicago, practices employment and general civil litigation, including business and commercial. Harlan was named as the State Bar of Wisconsin’s 2018 Lifetime Innovator for his conscientious and persistent efforts to broaden diversity within the profession both at MWH and for many years before that at Gonzalez, Saggio & Harlan.

Neither firm has made a specific point of hiring women or people of color into any one opening, Harlan says; it’s just been a function of being consciously open to diverse candidates. Without that consciousness, he says, “There’s a natural pull for people to gravitate toward people who are like them. You have to take some intentional steps to overcome that.”

Scott W. Hansen, U.W. 1976, is of counsel to the litigation practice at Reinhart Boerner Van Duren in Milwaukee. Throughout his career, he has made a point of mentoring female attorneys, even when he was not their direct supervisor. He encourages them to speak up in rooms full of older, ostensibly more experienced, mostly male lawyers who might otherwise dominate the conversation (as often occurs in large joint defense groups, for example).

As president of the mentoring group Inns of Court, he noticed this dynamic and that many bright, accomplished women in the room (and even some judges) were holding back – so he approached several of them individually and encouraged them to speak up more often to help create an environment where other women would feel more comfortable doing so. They did, and the result, he believes, is a more interesting and balanced exchange among all members.

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