

5 WAYS TO CHAMPION WOMEN LAWYERS

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According to recent data by the American Bar Association, the number of women lawyers continues to increase, from 31% in 2010 up to 38% in 2022.¹ Further, about 22% of equity partners were women in 2020, up from 15% in 2012,² according to the National Association of Women Lawyers. But there is no question that men still dominate the legal profession. We wondered why that is and wanted to better understand why “[w]omen as a whole are much more dissatisfied with their law firms than men.”³

To answer this question, we polled roughly 65 women lawyers in the Cleveland community for the three most important factors that led to their professional success and satisfaction. What we learned is that personal relationships and meaningful work are the most important factors to job satisfaction, followed by mentorship, autonomy, and flexibility in schedule. Less important factors are compensation, paths to promotion, and internal leadership opportunities. In other words, women want to feel supported and enjoy the work they are doing.

So how can law firms address these factors and continue to attract, retain, and help women lawyers prosper? Based on the factors identified as most important, we offer five ways for firms to champion and support their women lawyers. We hope that implementing these ideas will help us — together — keep trending upward.

Provide an Environment That Provides Meaningful and Personal Relationships

As the survey revealed, personal relationships are paramount to the happiness and success of our women lawyers. This is not surprising, as law firms are no different from a business, and it has been widely studied and known that “successful business is built on good relationships.”⁴ While it is true that it is important for both men and women to form meaningful connections at work, we know that “[w]omen have a high need for affiliation.”⁵

As a result, law firms should prioritize employee interaction and engagement to foster deep personal connections. This can be done by planning in-person events, but more importantly by creating a firm environment that fosters teamwork and inclusion. This

can be difficult in today’s society where many value flexibility, but if we abandon or sacrifice personal interactions, it stands to reason that we will have less-satisfied women colleagues.

2 Ensure Your Women Colleagues are Provided Meaningful Work

Teddy Roosevelt once said, “Far and away the best prize that life has to offer is a chance to work hard at work worth doing.” Our survey — and our own personal experiences — confirm this is true of women in the legal profession. This is especially true with younger generations of women lawyers, as it is apparent that they value more than just compensation alone. In today’s day and age, women attorneys “want to feel there is value and meaning in their work while contributing to something larger than themselves.”⁶ Meaningful work comes in many different shapes and sizes. But by developing personal relationships with your women colleagues, you will better understand what matters to them and can encourage them to align their interests with their cases. If their practice group is not directly aligned with their interests, there may be an opportunity to encourage them to take on a pro bono matter, which allows lawyers to give back and make a positive impact in someone’s life. And never underestimate the effect that expressing appreciation for their efforts and recognizing their successes has on your women colleagues.

3 Ensure Women Lawyers Have a Strong Mentor

Law firms should commit time and energy to ensuring that women lawyers have access to mentorship. These relationships can develop organically or formally. If the relationship is formal (i.e., a designated mentor is assigned), law firms should do their best to match the two individuals. This can be achieved, in part, by identifying what is important to the mentee and what they hope to gain from the mentorship. Perhaps they want a mentor who

Job Flexibility
Personal Relationships
Meaningful Work
Business Development
Strong Mentorship
Client Interaction
Internal Leadership Opportunities
Autonomy

works in a specific area; perhaps they identify with a mentor who has similar personal challenges (i.e., caretaking), or perhaps they want a mentor who can help shape their career trajectory. Then, on the mentor end, law firms should ensure that the mentor can — and wants to — take on the relationship. These steps will help ensure a higher likelihood of success for a long-term relationship and development.

4 Provide an Autonomous Environment
Another identified key to success is autonomy. As Forbes found in 2017, “[l]awyers who are highly autonomous feel like they can make their preferred choices and can express themselves authentically.” This is tied to personal relationships and mentorship, and if people feel as if they have control over their careers and the ability to express themselves, they will be happier in return.

5 Provide for Flexibility
Keeping all of this in mind, law firms should do their best to create professional space for women. That means ensuring that women

have not only the time to do meaningful work, but the space to figure out what that work might be. Being a lawyer is demanding. Many times women are working hard just to manage the work on their plate. But with assistance — and intention — law firms can ensure that their women lawyers have the opportunity to find work that is meaningful to them and the time to figure out how that work can help shape their practice.

In essence, the traditional incentives for lawyers (money, prestige, making partner, etc.) may no longer be the most important drivers, especially when it comes to our women colleagues. It’s time for law firms to adapt to what women value to ensure that more and more women lawyers succeed and advance.

¹ See ABA Profile of the Legal Profession, (last visited Feb. 16, 2023), <https://www.abalegalprofile.com/women.php>

² *Id.*

³ P. Smith, *There Are More Women Lawyers Than Ever, and They’re Not Pleased With Legal Industry Norms*, Am. Lawyer (June 29, 2021) <https://www.law.com/americanlawyer/2021/07/29/there-are-more-women-lawyers-than-ever-and-theyre-not-pleased-with-legal-industry-norms/?slreturn=20230116080854>.

⁴ See T. Hovsepian, *Business and People: Why Relationships Are Essential for a Successful Business*, Forbes (June 20, 2018) [https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbeslacouncil/2018/07/20/business-](https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbeslacouncil/2018/07/20/business-and-people-why-relationships-are-essential-for-a-successful-business/?sh=22a22c0474f2)

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⁵ A. Nelson, *What Matters for Women at Work? Relationships at Work*, Psych. Today (Dec. 1, 2019) <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/he-speaks-she-speaks/201912/what-matters-for-women-at-work-relationships-at-work>

⁶ Thomas Reuters, *How to Make Work More Meaningful to Attorneys in Your Law Firm* (June 7, 2022) <https://legal.thomsonreuters.com/blog/how-to-make-work-more-meaningful-to-attorneys-in-your-law-firm/>



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