

Why Are Women Attorneys Unhappy?

By: Vanessa Vidal

Have we come a long way baby? When it comes to female lawyers at law firms, the answers may be a resounding no. While women represent approximately 45% of associates, they only represent 20% of partners. Vault took a look back at its most recent Associate Survey, in which nearly 17,000 associates at law firms from across the country rated their firms in areas such as satisfaction, hours, compensation, diversity, and associate/partner relations. And in nearly all of these areas, women rated their firms lower than did men. While that's not new, what is interesting is that the same issues that have plagued women's careers over the last few decades endure:

Why are women attorneys unhappy? First, many female associates feel that it is impossible to have a family and make partner—and so they take themselves off the partnership track, even before they have children.

If that's true, so what can firms do about it? How many progressive law firms offer on-site childcare or reduced hours with the opportunity to make partner? Not many. At the end of the day, it's about billing a lot of hours and bringing business to the firm, and if you have other responsibilities, such as child rearing, and don't want to have a partner or third parties to do it for you, the chances of making partner are slim to none. Unless firms change the rules of the game, the choices for women will be the same.

Second, female associates complain that their male counterparts have different—and better—opportunities for business development, important assignments and mentorship.

Is this a case where men prefer other men in terms of providing assignments, either consciously or subconsciously? Could this be related to the fact that women are not perceived as available or motivated to become partner? Given that a majority of women are leaving before partnership there is some truth to that assumption, and this could be a catch-22 issue. Would women partners be more likely to provide other women more opportunities? That's not necessarily true. Perhaps this is a case where women may have to be more proactive and actively seek opportunities, rather than wait for them to be assigned.

Finally, a common complaint among senior women associates is that their potential for making partnership is not clear enough.

That gripe is equally true when it comes to men. What it takes to make partner at major law firms is as clear as mud, whether you are a man or a woman. However, the fact that men represent 80% of partners may mean that the message is not necessarily what is making the difference. At the end of the day, you have to stand out. To do that, you have to work on the big transactions and litigation, put in the hours, and bring in the clientele. There is no one way to do it, and firms are not keen to give its associates clear directions on how to make it, simply because there isn't a whole lot of room at the top.

While law firms have been creating more innovative and far-reaching programs and policies, the rub is in the lack of action. The numbers speak for themselves. The good news is that these are issues that are being talked about, but the bad news is that old stigmas, gender assumptions, and business practices endure.