

# Women and the Law

## "Struggling to Retain Women Leaders? What you don't know can hurt you"

Highlights from a Keynote Address by Brendan Burnett-Stohner  
CTPartners Executive Committee Member, Vice Chairman, and Head of the Global Inclusion Practice



**Brendan Burnett-Stohner**  
Vice Chairman, CTPartners

Recently, I was privileged to deliver the keynote address at the Hildebrand Institute 3rd Annual Forum for Law Firm Management, a gathering attended by a large and engaged group at The Yale Club of New York City. My speech--and the entire conference--focused on a subject of essential importance to all of us: best practices for developing and retaining women leaders in the legal profession.

We all know that there's a problem. As Susan Raridon Lambreth, a co-chair of this exciting event and vice president of Hildebrandt International, noted, women account for approximately 50% of law school graduates. Yet they represent only 45% of first year law associates. Just 16% of all equity partners are women. Only 28% are of-counsel. The statistics go on and on, and they're troubling.

While attrition is a problem for male lawyers too, it's clear that more women than men choose to leave law firms and the ones that stay face much tougher challenges while rising to the top. It doesn't matter how talented or motivated they may be, the system isn't working. There are obstacles that must be identified and overcome if law firms are to succeed in developing and retaining women leaders.

I began my own remarks by describing an intensive research project that my colleagues and I at CTPartners had been involved with during the six weeks prior to the conference. It was an important initiative in which I reached out to the top leadership of the twenty largest law firms in New York City. I wanted to talk with them about what their firms are doing to recruit, retain, train and develop women leaders.

Now, I am aware that some--even many--of the women who attended this event work at midsize, and smaller law firms, many in cities outside New York. But I felt that it was essential for us to get a handle on what was going on at the

largest firms and most especially to understand how committed their leaders are to substantively improving the situation for female lawyers.

Early in my research, I spoke with the chairman of one of these law firms. It was a very impressive firm and this man had clearly given some thought to the issue--in fact, he had recently given a speech on the subject of women in law firms. He was very frank about his desire to accomplish much more, but he was uncertain about how to proceed. I later spoke with one other chairman as well, who spent two hours talking to me about everything that the firm was doing to retain and promote its female lawyers. It was good to talk to him, although I quickly concluded that most of the activity didn't respond to the individual needs of women.

As I told the audience during my speech, the most shocking revelation of the project was this: No other chairman returned my telephone calls. Now, what does that say about these firms and their commitments to improving the existing situation for women lawyers?

My colleagues and I have done a good bit of other research on this topic as well, but the most telling anecdote may come from my own family. My daughter is a fifth year attorney at a major law firm in Los Angeles. She recently took an extended honeymoon during which she and her new husband volunteered for over a month in Africa. After she returned home, and was preparing to go back to work the next Monday, the managing partner she works with called her to recommend that she take an extra week off, so that she could truly take a bit of a vacation before coming back to the office.

That's quite a story, isn't it? And it emphasizes one of the major lessons that have come out of my research so far. I think of it as "individual vs. institutional." The benefit that my daughter received from her law firm wasn't anything official, it was personal. It came from an individual who recognizes her value to the team and is willing to be flexible in a way that really matters to her. An experience like this one can go a long way to bond a lawyer to her job and her law firm.

## CTPartners

Your Executive Search Partner:  
Committed to Performance, Quality, & Results™

## WOMEN AND THE LAW: Highlights from a Keynote Address by Brendan Burnett-Stohner

While looking around the conference room at The Yale Club, I wondered how many times that kind of flexibility might have been significant to the women in that room, as well as to countless women at law firms elsewhere. How many times might it have made the difference when a woman was struggling to decide whether to leave a law firm, or the profession entirely?

While I was addressing the group, I conducted a short, instant poll. The answers that came back from the attendees there were fascinating. I plan to follow up on the responses that we receive, as well as my ongoing research, with a white paper and future articles.

In the meantime, I'd like to share some of the highlights from the first set of questions and answers. When attendees were asked whether, given the opportunity to choose again, they would decide to go law school and to work for a law firm, 65% responded that they would. A substantial 47% of the attendees said that they would be happy to remain at the law firms which currently employed them. And 68% of those who had taken on administrative duties at their law firms reported that it had increased their satisfaction.

Those are high numbers, and they may well reflect the fact that the women attending the conference had attractive opportunities including, as one attendee pointed out, the opportunity to attend a leadership event like this one. That's all for the good. But isn't it also significant that 35% of the attendees said that they would not make the same career choice again? And 26%, not a small segment, noted that their increased administrative duties had actually reduced their job satisfaction.

A heated discussion followed when I raised the issue of flex-time and part-time opportunities. The speed with which hands shot up was an indication of just how much thought the attendees have given to this issue. While many law firms offer these types of work opportunities, it's clearly the case that many women lawyers feel their careers stand to suffer if they take advantage of this option. Women complained that flex- or part-time work limits their face time with colleagues and clients, reduces promotion opportunities, and poses management challenges that their firms didn't know how to handle.

There's much more for us to talk about, of course. My colleagues and I look forward to continuing our research and this important dialogue. But I leave you with some initial thoughts. First and foremost, if there isn't "buy-in" at the top of our law firms, I don't believe that women will ever enjoy equal leadership opportunities. Just look at how few chair-

men were even willing to discuss this issue over the phone with me! That said, I do believe that the most successful firms will be those that figure out how to overcome the obstacles and navigate that "institutional vs. individual" path that I mentioned earlier.

I also strongly believe that law firms have a lot to learn from other types of professional services firms. Some of the big accounting and management consulting firms are way ahead of the curve when it comes to helping women stay on a leadership track, even when those women decide that they need to take time off to raise their children, cope with elderly parents, or handle other personal challenges.

At KPMG International, for example, the firm does a great job of staying in touch with its alumnae through personal networks and other methods. In fact, it is so successful at this strategy that 55% of its rehires are women who were formerly with the firm. The firm is in such close touch with alums that management knows when a talented woman wants to come back to work, whether on a full- or part-time basis, and makes certain that opportunity is there for her. That's a best practice that law firms would do well to emulate.

And there's more. KPMG conducted a needs assessment to help identify how the firm could be more responsive to up-and-coming female professionals. One of the results was a new and effective "network of women." The firm also has introduced an exciting program that helps women clarify what they want to accomplish in their careers. Equally important, this program also helps the firm figure out how to best help them accomplish these goals.

It's essential for all of us to identify the scope of this problem and the nature of the obstacles that are preventing women lawyers from rising to the leadership ranks. But that's only the first step. Our objective, both at the conference and moving forward, is to identify the strategies and best practices that will make a real difference for women in the legal profession. I am proud to be part of this process.

*Brendan Burnett-Stohner is Vice Chairman & Head of the Inclusion Practice at CTPartners. Brendan can be reached at 212-588-3517 or [bburnett@ctnet.com](mailto:bburnett@ctnet.com).*

*For more information on CTPartners please visit [www.ctnet.com](http://www.ctnet.com).*