



Shining the spotlight

Heidi Goldstein and Nina McCollum offer insight into the women's initiative programme in place at US firm Thompson Hine LLP.

Thompson Hine LLP has been a pacesetter in recruiting, retaining and promoting women lawyers. There have been women in leadership roles at the firm for decades. Our female lawyers lead offices, run practice groups, chair the hiring committee and sit on the executive committee that governs the firm. Yet Thompson Hine's commitment to the development and retention of women has grown even brighter over the past three years since we formalised our firm-wide women's initiative into the 'Spotlight On Women' programme. This initiative has created regular opportunities for clients, potential clients and friends of the firm to network, share ideas and grow their own business.

Spotlight on our mission

The mission of our Spotlight On Women programme was formalised through collaboration with many of our female partners and associates and is to continue to be the pacesetter in the legal community in the advancement and promotion of all professional women, including those at our firm. To accomplish this mission, we are:

- Celebrating the growing presence of women decision-makers in law and business;

- Creating and facilitating opportunities for professional women to network with each other;
- Attracting and retaining talented women at our firm through a supportive environment;
- Promoting the skills and experience of our women lawyers;
- Showcasing the exceptional women leaders in our firm; and,
- Partnering with local, regional and national organisations with similar missions.

Our mission is carried out by all of the women at the firm, led by a firm-wide women's initiative chair and vice-chair who oversee the various office chairs who act as champions of the initiative across the firm. These chairs meet regularly via videoconference to plan and discuss programmes, set goals and exchange best practices. The specific components of the mission are also advanced through three firm-wide subcommittees:

1. Integration, retention and mentoring;
2. Marketing and client development; and
3. Professional development.

These committees identify strategies and make recommendations to implement

our mission through programmes, policy changes and strategic-planning objectives. The various chairperson positions also provide additional opportunities for our female lawyers to take leadership roles at the firm.

The internal component

To advance the internal component of the women's initiative, we focus on providing our female lawyers with opportunities for mentoring and professional development while allowing a variety of options to help achieve a work-life balance. These include:

Full circle mentoring

Our 360-degree mentoring programme allows small groups of female lawyers within each office to share ideas and issues as well as to mentor each other. The composition of each of these groups is strategically diverse to include women from all practice groups of the firm as well as women ranging from first-year associates to senior partners. The groups meet monthly and independently set their own agendas. The topics discussed can range from the best way to reach partnership at the firm to the best options for putting together a quick and easy dinner. These groups have

discussed politics, work-life balance, career wardrobes and non-profit involvement, but the goal of the programme is to foster communication among our associates and partners and encourage them to voice their opinions while finding support in other women in the firm. In short, we try to keep the 360-degree circle moving so each female attorney is mentoring while being mentored.

Mother-to-be mentoring

This year we also launched a mother-to-be mentoring programme that matches a mentor who has been through the experience of becoming a new mother and continuing to practise law, with a female lawyer expecting a child. The process starts from the first announcement of the pregnancy and continues through maternity leave, with a focus on reintegration. The goal is for the relationship to enable the new mother to remain connected to the firm throughout her experience and provide a support system to discuss transition and parenting issues, all with a long-term goal of retaining more female lawyers after they have children.

Professional development

Our female lawyers are offered the chance to develop into future leaders at the firm, through the establishment of several development opportunities in each of our offices. For example, the US-based women's organisation YWCA presented a three-part interactive leadership series for our female lawyers in Cleveland and Columbus that provided guidance and discussion on topics such as 'building a career board of directors', 'polishing your professional development plan' and 'how powerful women get their way'.

These internal programmes are supplemented by various external training programmes that promote leadership development, both locally and nationally. For example, each year, the women's initiative has worked with the practice group leaders to nominate a female

lawyer from each practice group, and each office, to attend the American Bar Association's Women in Law Leadership Academy (WILL) conference. This focuses on developing leadership skills and provides an excellent opportunity for lawyers from all seven of our US offices to begin to develop their own professional networks.

Work/life balance through support of flexible schedules

Although mentoring and professional development will help our female lawyers advance their careers, often it is also necessary to provide work-life balance options for those that may find juggling clients, cases, board meetings, childcare and family life to be a challenge. Pursuant to Thompson Hine's flexible schedule policy, we have quite a few lawyers (both male and female), successfully working a flexible schedule including various versions of reduced hours schedules as well as telecommuting. As a facilitator and ombudsperson, our flexible schedule coordinator oversees the programme and helps our lawyers formulate the right type of flexible schedule for their practice, monitors these lawyers to make sure they receive top quality work and are avoiding hurdles such as schedule creep, and serves as a resource for both the flexible schedule lawyers and the practice group leaders.

The external component

The diverse programming each of our offices has presented to our clients, potential clients and friends of the firm is perhaps one of the most exciting reflections from our Spotlight On Women initiative. Some of the highlights have included:

- A roundtable of female leaders sharing ideas and best practices for successful women's initiatives;
- A celebration of women who have focused their careers on sustainability, green business and climate change issues;

- A panel discussion to share tips from successful professional leaders in the Washington DC community; and,
- An interactive three-part series that offered Dayton professional women the opportunity to examine different strategies for more productive, peaceful and prosperous lives. The series emphasised the importance of balance in a professional woman's life.

We often present these events in collaboration with clients or other organisations that support women in law or business, thereby extending our diversity drive well beyond our firm's offices.

Nonprofit support has also become an important component of our Spotlight on Women programme. Each year, each of our offices selects a charity to partner with through the initiative. We have supported the American Heart Association's 'go red for women' campaign, the American Cancer Society's 'making strides against breast cancer' walk and Interstages, an agency that supports young teenage girls gaining skills to become successful women leaders.

And the spotlight shines on...

As the strength of our initiative continues to grow, we are proud of our successes. These successes are reflected in the number of female associates and partners who stay at our firm, the number of female lawyers who assume leadership positions, the number of female clients we are able to provide legal services to and the attendance at events within all of the communities we are able to support. All of which make it clear that our Spotlight on Women initiative is having a positive impact both inside and outside of Thompson Hine LLP. **WOMENLEGAL**

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