



KEEPING A FIRM CLIENT- FOCUSED DURING CHANGING TIMES

Forum spoke with Jami Wintz McKeon, chair of Morgan, Lewis & Bockius, about what clients want, breaking the glass ceiling and keeping focused while moving ahead.

By Gregg Wirth

After 34 years with Morgan, Lewis & Bockius, Jami Wintz McKeon now has a new perspective on the challenges facing today's legal environment – from behind the chair's desk.

McKeon was elected firm chair by the partnership in October 2013 and began a year-long transition from the 15-year leadership of Francis M. Milone. Prior to that, McKeon served multiple terms on the firm's Advisory Board and Compensation Committee while chairing and expanding its Litigation Practice, the firm's largest group.

Now, less than six months into her five-year tenure, McKeon, like many law firm leaders, is grappling with the evolutionary change roiling the legal industry and

corporate world, from new technology to clients' more complex needs. "Clients are changing their views and expectations of value," McKeon says. "They are very sophisticated, and they want us to understand their value proposition."

Clients today want law firms to do more – often much more – with less, pushing law firms to focus on delivering high-quality service more efficiently and economically, as well as communicating the value of those efforts. "We have to think and challenge ourselves to do better," says McKeon. "We want to be sure that we deliver excellent service to our clients, that we use our knowledge of the law to make their issues and challenges more manageable – because at



the end of the day, as lawyers, we help our clients solve problems.”

McKeon also wants to ensure that her firm approaches the use of technology in an innovative and creative way. “It’s vital to find a way to use technology to deliver excellent client service, but not let technology take over everything we do,” McKeon says. While the technological changes in the legal environment have been revolutionary, allowing for easier communication with clients, increasing the speed lawyers can process and respond to information, and vastly enhancing their mobility, they have also heightened client expectations.

“Clients expect us to respond quickly, be continually connected and more mobile,” McKeon says. “So, you have to make sure you are using technology as a tool, rather than something to which you are completely tethered.”

McKeon is familiar with heightened expectations. While the number of women practicing law has greatly increased, very few have become firm chairs. “When I was elected chair, I got more attention for being a woman than for my achievements as a lawyer,” McKeon says. “People thought it was astonishing because there are so few women leading large law firms.”

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Of course, being one of a small number of women firm leaders has its benefits, she notes. “One advantage is that I don’t have to look, sound and act like everybody else. I have been able to chart my own course and felt I could be very individualized and not be compared to anybody else — and that’s a luxury.”

McKeon also continues to practice law, focusing on complex litigation, including class actions and civil and regulatory cases. “I believe it’s really important for people that lead law firms in this environment to be practicing law,” she explains. “It allows you to know what your clients are experiencing, stay close to your clients, and gives you credibility with your partners.”

BUILDING BIGGER AND BETTER

Not long after McKeon began her tenure at the top, Morgan Lewis acquired much of the legal personnel of Bingham McCutchen. In November, the deal closed with Morgan Lewis adding nearly 800 lawyers, legal professionals and staff — including more than 200

partners — from Bingham. Now, Morgan Lewis has nearly 2,000 lawyers in 28 global offices and an estimated \$2 billion in annual revenue.

McKeon says the integration of the Bingham personnel and offices continues and will take time. “I don’t think integration happens overnight. Bumps are to be expected, but the goal is a firm with new capabilities and a common culture,” she says.

Indeed, she attributes the integration’s success — as well as much of Morgan Lewis’ strong performance — to management’s emphasis on team-oriented culture.

“We really place a high value on everyone knowing everybody else and on breaking down silos. Part of your leadership role is making sure everybody is seeing and hearing the same things,” she adds. “People need to be in the loop and feel in the loop.”

Now, as head of a firm that is much bigger than in the days when she rose to partnership, McKeon said that balancing the firm’s size with what she calls its “obsessive” commitment to client service is yet another challenge. “Large size can be a liability if you don’t handle it well and turn it to your advantage,” she notes.

In 2008, when things were rocky for the legal industry and much of the global economy, law firms struggled with feeling almost at odds with their clients who, in the face of a sharp economic downturn, were pushing back on rates. Amid industry layoffs, turmoil and uncertainty, Morgan Lewis went the other direction. “We said, these are our clients, the people we’ve been representing. How can we help them during this period?” McKeon explains. From that thinking, Morgan Lewis was able to develop a series of innovative programs related to alternative fees and supplementing client workforces that reinforced the firm’s relationship with its clients.

Today, remembering that lesson serves McKeon well, especially considering how client demands have changed over the past several years. “In-house legal departments will continue to be more and more sophisticated, which will in turn continue to put pressure on outside law firms,” she says, adding that the key for any law firm navigating today’s choppy waters is to stay focused, know who you are and who your clients are.

“Our job is to come to work every day and to perform at a high level, so that is what we are going to keep doing.” ●