

## McKeon Hits Major Milestone as Second-Term Morgan Lewis Chair

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Jami McKeon, Courtesy of Morgan Lewis

- *McKeon will kick off new term as firm's leader*
- *"I can't make this a job where you don't work hard," she says*

Morgan Lewis & Bockius chair Jami McKeon is on the cusp of starting a new term as the head of one of the nation's highest-earning firms, tasked with keeping it successful in a ferociously competitive legal market while balancing growing demands that firms make Big Law less stressful.

As she kicks off her next five-year stint, she is building on a list of accomplishments in an area that's been one of her top priorities, diversity.

The first big diversity related announcement of her second term will be that firm is promoting 18 women to partner on Oct. 1., which McKeon said makes up 60 percent of the firm's partnership class. Coincidentally, Oct.1 is also the first day of her new term.

Since January, Morgan Lewis has added 15 female lateral partners, 45 percent of the total senior attorneys the firm has hired from other firms, the government or other entities. Overall, 40 percent of the firm's lawyers are women, and 26 percent of its partners are women. Last year, the firm promoted 16 out of 30 partners, the best gender record among the top 15 Big Law firms by revenue, [according to a Bloomberg Law analysis](#).

She is among only a handful of women who have had the opportunity to lead major law firms. Faiza Saeed is presiding partner of Cravath, Swaine & Moore, becoming in 2016 the first woman to ever lead the elite legal bastion; and [Kim Koopersmith](#) is chair of Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld, a law-lobbying powerhouse. Ropes & Gray has elected a woman chair, Julie Jones, for the first time in its 150-year history.

"Diversity and inclusion immediately validate that your firm is a merit-based organization. That makes a big difference for clients," McKeon, 62, told Bloomberg Law in an interview at Morgan Lewis in Washington just before she left for a tour of some offices, including the firm's newest, in Abu Dhabi.

"CEOs tell me that they are surprised that firms still come in to pitch with non-diverse teams," she said. "At least one client told me that having a woman head was the reason they hired us."

## Personal Experience

McKeon arrived at Morgan Lewis in 1981 fresh out of Villanova University's law school. She worked as a trial lawyer, and became litigation practice head before taking the firm chair position.

She's faced her share of the challenges that come with being a woman in Big Law. When she arrived at Morgan Lewis, there was no formal maternity leave so she negotiated with the managing partner to come up with a three-month policy. She had two children in the 1980s and two more in the 1990s while working full-time and being the firm's youngest advisory board member.

"Some people were surprised when I came back. But I never missed a beat," said McKeon. It probably helped that she regularly worked long hours, driving back to the office, and getting by with little sleep. She brought her children to the office on the weekends.

When she became chair in 2013, her youngest children were in middle and high school. Melding her family and her new responsibilities wasn't a snap, McKeon recalled. She said she stood out from her colleagues as a woman in power, but the far bigger challenge was the ingrained expectation that working women fall short if they are not readily available for their kids' sport and school activities.

"I stretched every day, taking the latest flight out on a trip, and coming back on the earliest flight home to make sure I could get to every lacrosse game, every recital," McKeon said.

“I don’t think the expectations for women are so different now, and I worry that women are getting messages that the law is not a good career choice for women,” she said.

“But I think it’s a fantastic career because there is flexibility and autonomy, and more technology to be able to work from home. And the pay is good.”

Even so, McKeon said, “I can’t make this a job where you don’t have to work hard, where you don’t have to work some weekends, and where you don’t have to check your phone at night.

“But I can make it okay to go home and have dinner with your kids,” she said.

McKeon is keenly aware that being a lawyer has its pitfalls and has embraced well-being programs to help lawyers navigate them.

The firm has remote working and other programs to promote work flexibility. It signed the ABA well-being pledge last year, and hired the first director earlier this year to oversee ML Well, a program which is aimed at countering some of the ills, such as drinking and substance abuse, that plague the legal profession.

## **‘Connected’ Services**

As she begins her sixth year at the helm, McKeon said there are no plans to shift Morgan Lewis’ focus from what she called “connected legal services which we perform for clients.”

“We really never moved away from the old-style model when law firms had broad, deep relationships with their clients,” said McKeon.

The difference now, she said, “is that each practice is both a destination and a magnet. Our practices are elite in their own right so they attract their own clients as well as being part of the services we offer to clients.”

Across Big Law many firms are wrestling with how to adapt to changing client demands and quickly evolving technologies.

“More broadly, the implications over time could be significant if you apply this use of technology across practices in how firms serve clients. For one thing, it will likely allow firms to revisit and evolve their staffing and service delivery models,” said Kent Zimmermann, a legal consultant with the Zeughauser Group.

The rightsizing of legal support staff has been a long term trend in the legal industry.

Morgan Lewis took a step to trim its ranks last month when it offered buyouts to legal secretaries in its U.S. offices, though the firm says it has no current plans for involuntary layoffs.

McKeon and Morgan Lewis declined to comment on the buyouts beyond the firm's statement, which they said came as the firm continues to "focus on technology innovation and cost effective solutions for our clients."

At the same time, Morgan Lewis has also brought on about 60 partners since January of last year. These include former chairs of the National Labor Relations Board and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

Employment and labor continues to be one of the largest practices at the firm. Litigation and business transactions are the other biggest groups. The firm also expanded greatly in November 2014, not long after McKeon became chair, when it had combined with Bingham McCutcheon, adding some 750 lawyers, legal professionals and staff.

As of last year, Morgan Lewis employed some 2,200 lawyers, and brought in just under \$2.1 billion in revenue. The 2019 AmLaw rankings pegged the firm's profits per partner at \$1.39 million.

In the next five years, McKeon says part of her commitment will be to offer more pro bono legal services and foster professional growth, well-being, and rewards for employees all the while continuing to push for diversity at Morgan Lewis.

But it's not just about the big goals. "We have been fortunate to make some big steps that have worked out well for us, our clients, and our colleagues. But being a successful organization requires that you do all the little things right as well," she said.

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