

## Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Morgan Lewis' Jami McKeon

*Law360, New York (November 20, 2013, 1:18 PM ET)* -- Jami Wintz McKeon is a partner in Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP's Philadelphia office and chairwoman-elect of the firm, the first female to hold this position in the firm's 140-year history. Jami began her career in Morgan Lewis' Philadelphia office in 1981. Over three decades with the firm, she has held many leadership positions. Most recently, she served as leader of the litigation practice, the firm's largest practice group. McKeon has also been active in various community service organizations, including the Philadelphia Bar Association, the Mural Arts Program and the United Way. Today, her practice focuses on high-stakes litigation and regulatory proceedings, including those related to mortgage, credit card, and trust issues.

### **Q: How did you break into what many consider to be an old boys' network?**

A: When I and the women I knew graduated from law school in the early 1980s, we just wanted a level playing field. Not every firm provided that. I was lucky enough to work at a place that was a true meritocracy — if you worked hard, showed passion and energy, and delivered excellent work, you succeeded. You didn't have to be one of the "boys." You didn't have to give up your family or life outside of the office. You could be yourself and still succeed.

In addition to doing good work, my female colleagues and I were successful by being ourselves, being confident, being team players and by building relationships. Because we were dedicated to succeeding, the firm was dedicated to us and supporting us in that pursuit. When several of us became pregnant in the next few years, the firm asked us for our recommendation and without hesitation agreed to a three-month leave, which was almost unheard of at the time. We all took it and came back full-time, and had the firm's full support. I used to bring my little ones into the office with me and they would make play forts under the tables in the library. I never felt that my gender held me back.

### **Q: What are the challenges of being a woman at a senior level within a law firm?**

A: The challenges of being a senior leader at a law firm are the same irrespective of your gender — keeping up with client demands in a changing world and trying to lead by example, and inspire and motivate the people around you. While there may be men who are uncomfortable dealing with women in senior positions, I have not found that at Morgan Lewis. As the chair-elect of the firm (and before that as chair of the largest practice group at the firm), I have enjoyed tremendous support from my partners of both genders.

I know this goes against the conventional wisdom, but I actually think in some ways it is easier to be a woman because you can chart your own course. I had four children while I was at Morgan Lewis — two as an associate and two as a partner. There was no other woman who had done that, no path that I had to follow, and no one right way to do it. I did and said what I thought was right — I didn't have to follow a predefined script.

At the same time, you do feel a responsibility to forge a path for people coming up behind you, and that is an added challenge for women leaders given how far the legal profession has to go. To that end, it is important for women in senior-level positions to serve as role models and mentors to female attorneys, and to show them that it can be done.

**Q: Describe a time you encountered sexism in your career and tell us how you handled it.**

A: As a relatively young partner, I was up against an all-male team of opposing counsel who were particularly obnoxious and condescending in a very contentious case. They were regularly dismissive and chauvinistic, and took great pleasure in referring to me and the other females on the case as “honey” and “sweetie.” I could have been offended by it but instead I chose to be entertained by their arrogance and formed a much more diverse team to represent our client.

We took advantage of opposing counsel's inattention and lack of expectation regarding our ability by focusing on the case. When we beat the pants off them, it was very satisfying — and we took added satisfaction in knowing that they didn't like being defeated by “a bunch of girls.” Very few things are more effective in dealing with that type of behavior than winning.

Over the years, I've dealt with a lot of men who are sexist in a more benign way. I think it is very important to keep your perspective and sense of balance about those things, and put your indignation on a shelf. It is hard to be effective when you are letting your emotions get in the way.

**Q: What advice would you give to an aspiring female attorney?**

A: The advice I would give an aspiring female attorney is the same that I would give to an aspiring male attorney. Work hard. Be excellent. Be yourself. Be passionate. Understand the value in building relationships and establishing personal networks early on. It is critical to remember that we are in a service profession. It is all about delivering relentlessly excellent client service and building relationships with clients. If you do that, you will succeed. Don't get distracted by statistics and generalities, and don't let anyone else define what success looks like for you. Success is not a “one size fits all” anymore. There are more options regarding what success looks like today.

**Q: What advice would you give to a law firm looking to increase the number of women in its partner ranks?**

A: The goal should not be a statistical one. It should be to provide real and meaningful opportunities for women to succeed. To do that, the firm has to be conscious and intentional about it because women at the firm have to know that there is a path to success.

There are various ways to achieve this, some of which include ensuring that there are women in visible management roles who can serve as role models and mentors to junior women attorneys, ensuring that women are mentored by both male and female partners, creating and supporting women's initiatives, having an active approach to diversity, and providing opportunities for client development.

The firm also needs to recognize that success comes in various shapes and sizes, and not expect that all lawyers will follow the same path. We need to make sure that we are looking for opportunities to support, retain and promote our talented lawyers, and that we are embracing a diverse workplace, not merely tolerating it.

**Q: Outside your firm, name an attorney you admire and tell us why.**

A: There are a number of attorneys I admire, including many who work for our clients or who have gone into government service. One of those I admire most is a former colleague at Morgan Lewis, Doris DelTosto Brogan. Doris was the top student in her law school class and a fantastic associate, but she left the practice to teach law school. That was a hard choice — it had both economic and other consequences. It was no surprise to me that her talents were quickly recognized in the law school sphere, and virtually everyone I have ever met who was fortunate enough to have her as a teacher or mentor singles her out for her impact on their career. She is passionate about what she does, and I feel lucky that there are people like Doris who are dedicating their brains and expertise toward training the next generation.

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