

## Morgan Lewis Chair Says BigLaw Is Good For Women

By Jake Simpson

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In a recent interview, newly installed Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP Chair Jami McKeon said the flexibility afforded by new technologies has made practicing law a better career path for women looking to balance work and family than ever before.

"In some ways, being a lawyer allows you flexibility you don't have at other jobs," McKeon said. "Now that people can work from anywhere at any hour, you can have much more flexibility as a woman than other jobs where you have to be at a particular place from [9 to 5] every day."

McKeon has been an early adopter of new technology throughout a distinguished career at Morgan Lewis. An elite litigator, she became the first female chair in the firm's 141-year history Oct. 1 and will serve a five-year term.



Jami McKeon

Replacing longtime Morgan Lewis chief Francis Milone, McKeon is one of several women newly ensconced in the traditionally male-dominated position of BigLaw firm chair. Since the beginning of 2013, a woman has taken over the leadership role at six firms in the top 100 of the Law360 400 — most recently McKeon and new Bryan Cave LLP Chair Therese Pritchard, who are both in their first full week on the job.

McKeon has come a long way from her early days at Morgan Lewis, when there were no female partners, she said. But she never felt like her gender was holding her back. Thanks to what she characterized as "good intestinal fortitude and great child care," the veteran complex litigation partner has raised four children while climbing through the ranks over a 33-year career at the firm.

"It was clear from Day One that Morgan Lewis was a meritocracy," said McKeon, who took over as firm chair Oct. 1. "I never felt I was disadvantaged — or advantaged — by being a woman."

Still, women have faced long-term under-representation in law firm partnerships, McKeon said. While women have made up more than 40 percent of U.S. law school graduates since the 1980s, a **Law360 survey** of nearly 300 law firms in February found that only 21 percent of U.S.-based partners were female.

The new Morgan Lewis chair pointed to the rise of in-home and mobile technology as a potential pathway to keeping more elite female talent in private practice.

"When I was coming through the ranks, if you had a brief the next day, you didn't go home," she said. "There was no computer at home, no Internet for research. People in law school now are used to staying connected without being in the same place, and as law firms adjust to that reality and get more creative about using technology to connect people, I think we'll keep more women and men in the profession."

McKeon has taken advantage of cutting-edge technology throughout her three-plus decades in private practice. She worked on a typewriter in her office as a young associate, despite warnings that she would look like a secretary, because it allowed her to write briefs more quickly. In 2003, she was told that she spent more time on her Blackberry than any other single user in the U.S.

"I was using more data than some small companies," she said with a laugh.

The record usage was a function of McKeon's weighty task that year: convincing hundreds of attorneys from dissolving California firm Brobeck Phleger & Harrison LLP to join Morgan Lewis, which at the time had a limited presence on the West Coast. Milone said he enlisted McKeon, then a senior litigation partner, to connect with the Brobeck Phleger group because many of them were litigators.

McKeon was instrumental in persuading 160 Brobeck Phleger attorneys to sign on with Morgan Lewis and integrating them into the firm, added Milone, who served as firm chair from 1999 until last week.

"[Adding the Brobeck Phleger attorneys] happened because of Jami's personality, frankly, and the fact that she was so positive and welcoming with that group," he said.

The experience gave McKeon an intimate knowledge of Morgan Lewis' strengths and weaknesses and led to a series of leadership roles at the firm, culminating in her election as firmwide chair in October 2013. It also reinforced that whether you're courting new clients or working with other attorneys, the legal industry is all about networking.

"In a law firm, you don't have bricks and mortar," she said. "You have two things of value: your clients and your talent, and both of those are about relationships. The firm's investment of putting me into that environment [with the Brobeck Phleger attorneys] sent a strong message about the value we place on integration."

Morgan Lewis appears on the verge of another weighty integration project. The Philadelphia firm has agreed in principle to merge with Bingham McCutchen LLP, according to a source familiar with the matter, which could bring the firm's global attorney head count to more than 2,000.

McKeon declined to comment on the status of the Bingham merger. But she said Morgan Lewis has the infrastructure for rapid growth through integration.

"I have great confidence in the firm's ability to grow where we see it being beneficial for our clients and for the firm," she said, "and I have confidence in our ability to make that growth work."

The firm also sees room for geographic expansion in Asia. Morgan Lewis opened offices in Moscow and Almaty, Kazakhstan, in 2012, and though McKeon declined to specify future expansion plans, she said

there is "potential for growth" in Asian financial centers where the firm doesn't currently have an office, such as Singapore and Hong Kong.

Morgan Lewis must also address the changing market for legal services in the U.S., where in-house counsel have been steadily pulling resources back in-house. A recent survey of corporate counsel by BTI Consulting Group Inc. found that companies are reducing their budgets for outside legal spending by \$1.1 billion in 2014 — less than the \$5.8 billion pullback of 2012 but nonetheless significant.

McKeon said Morgan Lewis has been "very creative in approaching the new normal," using technology to improve client relationships and aggressively pushing alternative fee arrangements. McKeon, who has been advocating for AFAs for more than a decade, views the long-term rise of new fee setups as both inevitable and beneficial to the industry.

"I remember in the early 2000s trying to talk clients into letting us try to structure [AFAs], and some of those very same clients now have significant portfolios where they do that," she said. "Law firms who look at it as the client taking advantage of them just don't know what it's about. It's not a negative thing — it's a different way of approaching a new business reality."

--Additional reporting by Andrew Strickler. Editing by Kat Laskowski and Chris Yates.

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