

Women Making Modest Gains In Firm Leadership, Survey Says

By **Andrew Strickler**

Law360, New York (August 06, 2013, 7:29 PM ET) -- Women in law firms continue to make modest gains in leadership roles in an increasingly family-friendly industry, according to an annual survey and list of best firms for women released Tuesday, although firms overall continue to lag behind corporate America on several factors related to women in the workforce.

Based on a survey conducted by Working Mother Media and Flex-Time Lawyers LLC examining firms of 50 or more lawyers for the year 2012, the list lauds 50 partnerships for high marks on criteria such as flexible work time, annualized billable hours and the percentage of women among equity and non-equity ranks.

Among the named top firms for women, 78 percent had one or more female lawyers among their biggest business generators, up from 69 percent last year.

Since the survey was first launched in 2007, women have represented a slowly growing percentage of counsel, equity and partner positions, said Jennifer Owens, editorial director of Working Mother Media and director of the Working Mother Research Institute.

The named firms promoted an average of eight lawyers to partnership during the survey period, but just one in eight new partners had taken advantage of reduced work hours.

"It's happening. It's not a lot, but it does seem to be happening," Owens said. "We'd like to see that number go up, and see the usage of reduced hour [policies] clicking up."

The firms called out for praise ranged in size and region, including megafirm DLA Piper US and its nationwide resource group for training and advancing female lawyers, and employment firm Littler Mendelson PC and its 27 percent female equity partnership, the highest of the 50 named firms.

Schiff Hardin LLP, where about 22 percent of the firm's 100 equity partners are women, was recognized in part for a newly formalized "phase-in, phase-out" procedure for helping transition at both ends of a lawyer's maternity leave.

"It's a great deal of planning with their practice groups and with any mentors so that we can make sure they have an opportunity to phase down so that the clients are cared for, as well as our attorneys," said Schiff Hardin managing partner Ronald Safer. "When they are returning, it's making sure they are

brought back into matters that they have handled and other new matters so they have a sufficient workload, but one that matches the time they can commit to practice."

The list also noted that 47 of the 50 named law firms consider lawyers working reduced hours eligible for equity partnership, although Owens noted that a stated policy does not always translate into real support.

"We are particularly excited about our Best Law Firms who recognize that designing a women-friendly workplace is not only about individually inspiring women but also making structural changes to the law firm model to make it more hospitable for women to thrive," Flex-Time Lawyers President Deborah Epstein Henry said in a statement.

All of the named 2013 best firms offer flex-time and reduced hours, while only 15 percent of lawyers at those firms use modified work hours. About 9 percent worked reduced hours, notably higher than the average of 6 percent found industrywide. Forty-seven percent of lawyers taking advantage of a flex-time policy were partners, while nearly 40 percent of those working reduced hours held counsel positions.

Eighty percent of named firms offer backup child care at their facilities, up from 76 percent, with nearly three-quarters subsidizing backup child care, compared to two-thirds in the previous year.

Not all the news for female attorneys is so positive. The number of large law firms with women heading offices, practice groups and governance committees dropped from 50 to 42 between 2012 and 2013, the Women in Law Empowerment Forum said in January. Women also fill less than 5 percent of BigLaw's firmwide leadership roles, while female partners overall make more than 10 percent less than their male colleagues.

Meanwhile, the legal industry's closest corollary in corporate America has overall far better flex-time policies, Owens said.

"The Big Four accounting firms are dealing with clients and a firm structure and partnership, and they're able to [employ a flex-time policy] and not stigmatize anyone who uses it," Owens said. "The legal industry is behind the 100 best companies [for women] and I think there is still work to be done."

Faegre Baker Daniels LLP partner and executive committee member Kathlyn Noecker said her firm's strong female representation in top posts was a key part of emphasizing the value of female lawyers: A third of the firm's management board seats, a quarter of the executive committee, and five of 16 practice group leaderships are held by women, she said, along with three nonlawyer executive positions.

"If you talk to any diverse group of lawyers, they want to see people like them that are held out as successful so they can see they can make it, and I think we've shown them the way," she said. "When decisions are made, there is a wide array of decision-makers at the table, and that leads to better results."

--Editing by Jeremy Barker.