

Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Mayer Brown's Debora De Hoyos

Law360, New York (December 12, 2013, 2:19 PM ET) -- Debora de Hoyos is a partner in Mayer Brown LLP's Chicago office and has spent her career at the firm as a member of the firm's banking and finance practice. Her work focuses on lending and emerging markets transactions, particularly involving Latin America. From 1991 to mid-2007, she was managing partner of the firm and, until mid-2009, was a member of the firm's policy and planning committee. Currently, she serves as the firm's first global client relationship partner overseeing client development activities.

She is an active member in the Chicago community and currently serves on the boards of Wellesley College, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Providence-St. Mel School and the Institute for the International Education of Students. She was recognized by Harvard Law Bulletin as one of 50 outstanding alumnae of the law school on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of its admission of women.

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

A: I cannot remember a time when I did not plan to have a challenging career. My parents always seemed to take it as a given that I would, too. My closest female friends throughout elementary, middle and high school, as well as at Wellesley, all had similar goals. As college was ending, my father nudged me towards law school by sharing his acerbic opinion that, given my personality, I was unlikely ever to get married, and I should prepare myself to do interesting work and earn a good living.

Fortunately, by the time I got to Harvard Law School, professors had stopped asking women to justify their taking the place of a male student, although I had the sense that some of my male classmates hadn't really internalized the idea that we would be their lifelong professional peers.

But then I arrived at Mayer Brown, and the first-year class of associates in 1978 was truly remarkable — half of us were women! I was fortunate to have great opportunities to do interesting work and received tremendous support from the senior lawyers I worked with. Perhaps if I had felt that I had to break through barriers to succeed, I would have questioned my course, but I've never felt that more was demanded of me than my very best work — and lots of it.

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

A: I interpret “senior level” as meaning a leadership position. The demands on leaders at large law firms in 2013 are significant, but I don’t believe they are greater, or that there are special traps, for women. Any partner who reaches a senior level at a law firm should have earned through her track record a good deal of relationship capital, which affords her respect, credibility and legitimacy in her position. She should identify what she wants to accomplish as a leader in the service of the firm and deploy her relationship capital to accomplish her goals, which will require no less hard work, insight, creativity, agility and care than does client work. And it requires a massive commitment to communicating with one’s colleagues, both listening and presenting ideas — more communicating than one would ever think necessary — in order to learn, show respect, adapt and persuade.

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

A: I have wracked my brain for a juicy anecdote and I don’t have one! Sure there were lots of times early on when older opposing counsel called me “dear” or someone on a deal excused himself for using salty language and, on occasion, I became aware of the possibility that I wasn’t being taken seriously. But my experience has been that courtliness hasn’t equated with lower expectations or lesser opportunities. I am not aware of any opportunity I didn’t get because I am a woman.

That being said, there are challenges. Every person carries a load of biases, most of them unconscious, that influence behavior and have consequences as to who one gets to know well or thinks of to meet a client or work on a matter. I believe this challenge for our profession requires acknowledgement and steady attention.

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

A: I’ve deconstructed my career advice into an eight-point list, which I will try to make succinct: First, make your top priority doing quality work with commitment. If your work isn’t good, none of the other seven points matter. Plus, work is more fun once you know what you are doing. Second, seek out the work you want to do. Don’t be too shy to ask. Third, don’t do piece work. By this I mean that, even if you only have a small slice of a matter, try to learn as much of the context as you can. You will do better work and find it more interesting. Fourth, be willing to put in the hours and sweat when they are needed. Fifth, clients hire us for our judgment; you can develop yours through observing more senior lawyers. Sixth, build your internal network. Our colleagues are also our clients. Seventh, build your external network. Eighth, take on challenges outside your comfort zone.

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

A: The key is to make the most out of the mid-to-senior associate years. If an associate gets substantive, challenging assignments, good partner guidance and lots of client contact, she will have the opportunity to develop excellent professional skills, and she and the firm will have a good basis for deciding if becoming a law firm partner is the right ambition for her.

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

A: Alona Evans was my college senior thesis adviser. Her field was public international law and she was a fine teacher, albeit rather terrifying. She was the first woman president of the American Society of International Law and the first woman editor-in-chief of the American Journal of International Law. She encouraged me to go to law school. She died quite young before I could tell her how much I admired her and valued her influence, so I am doing so here. Among the living, Martha Minow's excellent leadership in the very visible and influential role of dean of Harvard Law School is great for the profession.

The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the firm, its clients, or Portfolio Media Inc., or any of its or their respective affiliates. This article is for general information purposes and is not intended to be and should not be taken as legal advice.

All Content © 2003-2013, Portfolio Media, Inc.