

The Glass Ceiling Is Just a Reflection

By Shari Davidson



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I. Introduction

Law is a male-dominated profession. There are more doors open to women today, but women have not achieved economic parity with men. There has been tremendous progress, but the earning power of women is still considerably lower than that of men. Women are increasingly represented in many top leadership roles here and around the world, as women advance professionally, they have begun to redefine themselves.

II. Advice from Successful Women Attorneys

What qualities do women possess who break through the glass ceiling? I asked several successful women attorneys: "How they got to where they are today and what advice they have for women attorneys who are just starting out?"

Leslie Berkoff, Partner, Moritt Hock & Hamroff LLP:

My path was somewhat unconventional: after clerking for a federal judge for the job market was not doing well, I decided to take another clerkship in the Bankruptcy Courts. I fell in love with bankruptcy and when I "hit" the job market I decided to avoid the big firm game and picked a smaller, more collegial place where I saw great growth opportunity and the ability to balance work/life.

Women today don't have to follow the lock-step path of your colleagues; don't be afraid to explore other opportunities.

Kathleen Turland, Chief Compliance Officer, powered by GE:

Work closely with people who you admire and respect. Develop good relationships with your colleagues, understand the roles they play, the demands and pressures of the firm, and what made them successful. Be smart, volunteer assignments others may not want. It worked well for me, might work for you too.

Be open to advice from many, look at what they are doing and think whether that works for you, be willing to move, accept change as it comes and go with it.

Elizabeth J. Champnoi, Esq. Director, Dispute Advisory & Forensic Services, Stout Risius Ross, Inc.:

I got to where I am today by building a strong network of colleagues, mentors and sponsors while gaining experience and developing skills to excel in my dispute resolution practice.

I would advise new attorneys to network, build relationships, follow up and do what you say you are going to do. To be successful in the long term, attorneys must build a brand and it's never too early to start.

Phyllis Weiss Haserot, President, Practice Development Counsel and author of, *The Rainmaking Machine: Marketing Planning, Strategy and Management for Law Firms*:

Some of the things women think are their issues also are issues for many men. So they need to address them together. The biggest obstacles vary from firm to firm or company depending on the cultures and personalities. So many things have to change for all genders in firm cultures and policies that motivate behaviors. Often lip service exists for good and fair things that is counter to what actually exists in the culture and unwritten rules.

Women need to be more aware of the intersection of gender and generational attitudes. Different generational attitudes inform and influence attitudes and behaviors affecting all aspects of diversity. If the same messages are going out to everyone, be aware that they are being received and interpreted in different ways. I believe this is one reason more progress has not been made. I advocate cross-generational conversation and conversations with men.

Marie Lefton, Esq. Principal, Lefton Consulting:

In terms of strategies for getting around the glass ceiling, there is nothing wrong with taking an in-house position for shorter hours and accepting lower pay. Not everyone wants to be an equity partner.

Women Partners with books of business, build them organically, whereas most men inherit their books from other men. This observation comes from my consulting practice as well as from my research in this field. In light of this, what advice would I offer to younger women seeking to build a book of business? Don't allow others (men) to make decisions for you, e.g., if you have a trial in another state, . . . don't allow the lead partner to decide that you should stay at home for your family. If you are second-chair on the case and want to be there at trial, speak up in a firm-but-nice-way.

Tina B. Solis, Partner, Nixon Peabody LLP:

Many attorneys, both men and women, have struggled and continue to struggle with work / life balance. Fortunately, many law firms have recognized this issue and have put mechanisms in place that allow its attorneys to help achieve that balance such as a reduced hour schedule, flexible hours or working remotely. This has allowed law firms to retain the best talent in the long run.

In order to break through the glass ceiling, you need to be proactive. It's your career, so you need to advance it. In addition to developing a solid book of business, you need to volunteer for administrative projects to demonstrate your leadership skills and a commitment to the firm.

J. Joan Hon, Partner, FisherBroyles LLP, LAW FIRM 2.0®:

I have not yet faced the usual "women's issues" of motherhood, marriage, and running a traditional household, but I did go through with caring for my parent and handling a plethora of issues after she died very early on in my career. I took a break after my third year for these reasons (and not some of the more traditional), so I would say I do have experience with re-entering the workforce and juggling work life balance even without being a mother.

Women who are fed up will turn to an alternative firm, (like mine and succeed incredibly), set up their own practices or look for non-traditional legal roles. So much can happen with persistence and positivity.

Elizabeth D. Schrero, Partner, Seyfarth Shaw LLP:

Women have come a long way but still have a long way to go to achieve parity. I see movement towards the goal of parity tied to increased business development of women which in turn is tied to women's initiatives and sponsorship and critically, rising numbers of women in positions of authority in business, who will send work to women attorneys.

Some younger women and men are choosing not to reach to the glass ceiling, they want flexible work arrangements and some just opt out of the law firm partnership track.

Marci Goldstein Kokalas, Partner, Lazare Potter & Giacovas LLP:

I got to my current position by focus and hard work – and maintaining relationships. If you are just starting out, take time to think about what you want to do – both in work and your personal life. Be upfront about your goals with your superiors.

Seek out work – it will not just come to you. And don't lose sight of what you have outside of work – I think balancing work and personal life is very difficult and ever-changing, but very important for your ultimate happiness.

III. Conclusion

Is it possible to think you can have it all? Absolutely. No one says it is going to be easy, but yes these women are at the top of their game. It comes down to what is important for you, for many it is about balance between their personal lives and their careers. This is really a personal decision, and thankfully there are enormous opportunities for women in law. With talent and hard work, you can achieve whatever you want.

Shari Davidson is president of On Balance Search Consultants. Shari advises law firms on how to take a firm to the next level and helps rising talent make the transition to the right law firm. Shari has facilitated programs for Fortune 100 companies, non-profit organizations, adult ed, colleges and universities, and publicly held programs, including *Where Does All the Time Go When You're Having Fun?*, *Take the Fear Out of Goal Setting*, *The Hidden Job Market* and *Interviewing & Job Interview Preparation*. Her email is shari@onbalancesearch.com.