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Column: How law firms are addressing gender inequality

RANDI LEWIS
Contributor

Gender inequality is a problem in nearly all U.S. workplaces, but it has been a particularly acute obstacle in the legal industry.

Nationally, there is a 44 percent gap between the compensation of male and female law firm partners, according to the 2016 Partner Compensation Survey conducted by Major, Lindsey & Africa, the world's largest legal search firm. It consistently remains a problem all firms face, and Baltimore is no exception.

“Origination credit” for bringing in the business, or rainmaking, drives the pay disparity between male and female law firm partners – and has throughout the profession's history. For decades, purchasers of legal services were men who chose other men – former classmates, former colleagues, and country club pals – as their lawyers. Male partners, therefore, control their firm's institutional relationships and receive origination credit for the legal fees collected from those clients. When they retire, they tend to pass the ownership to a male colleague, creating a cycle difficult for women to break.

Unsurprisingly, the Partner Compensation survey found that male partners originated about 50 percent more business, billed more hours, charged higher billing rates, and had higher working attorney collections than



Randi Lewis is a director at legal recruiting firm Major, Lindsey & Africa in Hanover.

female partners. However, it also revealed some good news for female lawyers: the average originations reported by females increased 40 percent in just two years, suggesting that an increasing number of women partners are turning into rainmakers.

Despite these challenges, many firms in the Baltimore area are making great strides to reduce the disparities between genders and create more opportunities for women to originate business. Some are requiring “owners” of the work to share origination credit with non-equity partners who have a long working relationship with the client. A growing number of female partners

in Baltimore have turned toward cultivating direct relationships with local and national institutional clients – an increasing number of which now have women in the leadership positions.

These developments mean that women are gaining greater power over how their companies purchase legal services. In a smaller city like Baltimore, it creates more opportunity for women to connect and forge relationships. It also helps female partners to grow their book of business with the help of an increasing number of their contemporaries who lead Baltimore-based businesses.

Another positive development for the Baltimore legal industry is that many women now hold key leadership positions in their law firms, as practice group leaders, executive committee members and managing partners.

In fact, in 2016, eight Baltimore firms were led by women partners. With a greater concerted effort on everyone's part, that number will continue to grow.

Ending the inequalities between men and women in law won't happen immediately, but every step is an important one toward the end goal. As law firms try to make sense of how they can promote equality, emulating the examples set by smaller markets like Baltimore has the potential for a ripple effect across the industry.