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Business



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Female partners scarce at law firms

Charlotte ranks last in percentage of women in leadership

MIKE DRUMMOND
Staff Writer

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Charlotte law firms rank dead last in promoting women to partner.

NALP, a national organization for lawyers, has conducted a gender and diversity survey for about a decade. Charlotte firms have done poorly among some 40 cities every year.

Charlotte landed at the bottom of last year's survey with women holding 11 percent of law firm partnerships.

Denver was highest with 23 percent.

NALP's next survey will be released in November.

The Observer recently called the Charlotte-area firms surveyed by NALP and found the percentage of female partners has risen since last year. However, Charlotte could maintain its cellar-dwelling status if firms in competing cities have kept pace.

Interviews with more than a dozen local law firms and industry experts failed to unearth a Charlotte-specific reason for the poor gender standing. Nor does NALP's survey explain the differences among cities.

As in other cities, Charlotte's low female representation, in part, reflects law-firm practices that put a premium on billable hours over work-life balance.

Lawyers move from associates, who are salaried employees, to partners, who share ownership and profits, by bringing in new business and revenue.

Kobi Kennedy-Brinson is a former associate at Hunton & Williams, a national firm with a 35-lawyer Charlotte office that has eight partners, none of whom are women.

Her newborn required intensive home-health care in 2002. Kennedy-Brinson found herself struggling to serve the firm and arrive on time at her Matthews caregiver by 5:30 p.m. every day.

"I wasn't able to give my billable best because of my time constraints with my daughter," she says.

In late 2002, she took a job at Wachovia, which offers 10 paid family-care days a year, in addition to other family-friendly policies.

At a firm, "the money is great, the perks are great," Kennedy-Brinson says. "But there's a price to be paid for that."

Other cultural and business forces also are at play, observers say.

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In a field still dominated by white males and heavily dependent on networking and mentoring -- often at male-dominated bastions such as golf courses -- women often feel left out.

"A person is more likely to mentor someone like them," says Mary Kaczmarek, president of Skillful Means Marketing, which advises law firms on business development, hiring and retention practices.

Some see signs of optimism. According to the American Bar Association, female enrollment in law schools last year has increased to 49 percent from 43 percent in 1994.

The Charlotte Women's Bar, formed in April, already has 133 members. And the Mecklenburg County Bar launched its first special diversity committee last year.

Mary Howerton, who stepped down as executive director of the Mecklenburg County Bar in 2003 after 18 years in that position, says that in that time the group paid little attention to lifting the profile of female lawyers.

She recalls that in the 1980s, a collection of hard-charging female lawyers were climbing the ranks. She viewed them as a vanguard. Howerton says she thought there was no need for a women's bar.

She has since changed her mind.

Women need their own local bar association to help them define and advance their own issues, such as increasing the numbers of female partners, she says.

Susan Jackson, president of the Charlotte Women's Bar and a partner at Kennedy Covington Lobdell & Hickman, says the new association as yet has no agenda. The group meets in November, when members are expected to talk about possible direction, she says.

The county bar association's special committee on diversity decided to first focus on ways to get more minorities into the legal profession, says chairman George Hanna. But after he was informed of Charlotte's low ranking on female law partners, he questioned whether the committee should turn its attention to that topic.

Local firms say they are trying to boost women's representation. Robinson Bradshaw & Hinson recently won a statewide award for its efforts to balance work and life. Those included eliminating billable hours, offering 10 weeks of paid maternal leave, and free dependent health coverage.

Culp Elliott & Carpenter, a 15-lawyer firm with no female partners, had two women on the partner track. One left to join the seminary and the other followed her husband to New York, says senior partner Bill Culp.

Law firms also say they lose female lawyers, like Kennedy-Brinson, to corporations, where hours generally are more predictable. Corporate employers boast better parental leave benefits, more flexible hours and more places at the power table for women.

Half the legal management team at Wachovia Corp., for example, are women.

Wendy Tice-Wallner, chairman of San Francisco-based Littler Mendelson, says corporations increasingly are demanding that law firms show greater commitment to diversity. Firms that fail to do so may pay a price.

Compass Group, a food services company with North American headquarters in Charlotte and \$8 billion in annual sales, votes with its dollars. When selecting outside law firms, Compass rejects firms that don't meet gender and racial diversity criteria, says Phil Wells, the company's general counsel.

"We've been disappointed in retaining outside counsel (in Charlotte) because of a lack of diversity," says Wells, whose staff of 27 lawyers includes 16 women.

Wells says local law firms are dominated by a "small, good-old boy network" in need of an update. "I hope my legal brethren listen and do something about it," he adds.

Good for Business

A Catalyst study of Fortune 500 companies last year showed businesses with more women and minorities in management made more money than less-diverse peer companies.

Verdict: Charlotte Lags the Nation

Compared with other cities, Charlotte's law firms consistently have ranked near or at the bottom when it comes to percentage of women in positions of leadership.

Top three

Denver	23.58
San Francisco	21.31
Miami	20.03

Bottom three

Orange Co., Calif.	12.5
Northern Virginia	10.96
Charlotte	10.87

SOURCE: NALP, 2004 survey



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