

"Blueprint" for Success

A CAREER-CHANGING TOOL FOR WOMEN LAWYERS

By Deborah Epstein Henry

Lawyers, whether law firm practitioners or in-house counsel, are working hard to improve the status of women in the profession. Law students had been an untapped, competitive pressure point to improve the retention and promotion of women in the profession. But, in 2006, that changed when Flex-Time Lawyers LLC co-sponsored a forum with the New York City Bar Committee on Women in the Profession that focused on educating women law students on how to select women-friendly employers and the key ingredients for success. Attendees left the forum with "The Cheat Sheet," a guide to selecting, creating, and ensuring a women-friendly employer (view "The Cheat Sheet online at www.abanet.org/yld/publications/home.shtml).

When we introduced The Cheat Sheet, we had a number of goals in mind: First, educate women law students on how to avoid the traditional stumbling blocks of their female predecessors before those same patterns repeat themselves. Second, capitalize on the power in numbers as a means to shape how law firms and other legal employers refocus their women-friendly efforts and programs. Third, create a venue for information-sharing by inviting all of the interested parties to the forum and having them in the same room to brainstorm and play a role. Fourth, create an open dialogue and external motiva-

tion among legal employers and law schools to compete on these issues to attract, retain, and promote the most talented women students and practitioners. Fifth, initiate a reverberating effect across the country.

The Cheat Sheet provides questions for women law students to consider as indicia of a legal employer's commitment to the retention and advancement of women. The questions are not meant as a script but as a guide to enable women law students to decipher an employer's attention to such issues as female representation, partnership and advancement, mentoring, leadership, workplace flexibility, and business development. It also offers suggestions for additional steps women law students could take once an offer is in hand. For legal employers, those same questions have been used as a checklist to determine employers' strengths and weaknesses to improve the future role of women. Additionally, The Cheat Sheet provides tips for legal employers and law schools and a resources section that lists key Web sites providing information on work/life balance and women's issues in the law.

Since the release of The Cheat Sheet, in my talks at law schools and bar associations, I've focused on educating women law students to become a pressure point for change and enabling them to identify women-friendly employers. From this work, it is clear that the next step is training women law students and junior women lawyers to plan for their success. There is no question about women's intelligence and capacity to become talented lawyers. Instead, the focus should be on overcoming the other intangibles that have traditionally caused women lawyers to stall. The goal is to enable women law students and junior women lawyers to design blueprints—plans for their success—by training

them at the law school and junior associate levels.

"Blueprinting" programs are the flip side of the popular "re-entry" programs designed to re-tool women professionals who have left their professions, primarily for child rearing, and are positioning themselves to return. By blueprinting as women prepare for and enter their law careers, ideally we

will ensure that more women will not need to leave their careers mid-stream. Law schools, legal employers, and bar associations need to incorporate "blueprinting" programs into their curriculum and train students and junior lawyers on the subjects of mentoring, leadership, workplace flexibility, networking and partnership, and advancement. Blueprints will

empower women to navigate the hidden ingredients to success, plan for the challenges they will face, and gain the awareness and skills to succeed.

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