



Pitch parity: Transforming gender diversity in client pitch activity

Helen Donegan, US editor (content), recently spoke with Meredith Moore, global diversity and social responsibility director, and Robert Lennon, chief business development and communications officer, about how Weil transformed its approach to diversity in client pitch activity with measurable results

Although Weil has had a longstanding commitment to promoting and supporting its talented female attorneys through its 'Women@Weil' programme and other initiatives, the firm, like most in Big Law, knew it had to do more. As part of this effort, Weil's management committee formed a Taskforce on Women's Engagement & Retention (TOWER) in 2014, and the firm has seen notable results.

'We were successful in recruiting and often retaining women associates, but in terms of looking ahead at promotion and ultimately future firm leadership, we wanted to undertake more concrete steps to uncover the issues at play and then find ways to address them,' explains Moore.

Weil

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TOWER, which is composed of partners and other senior firm business executives, oversees all women’s initiatives globally within Weil, with a particular focus on female advancement and leadership. Moore points out that ‘40% of its members are male because promoting and advancing female attorneys is a firm priority and not just a women’s priority’. TOWER was initially tasked with finding out what was influencing successful women to leave the firm, as well as what was frustrating female attorneys in their intended career paths.

The focus on pitch activity

‘It was once true that if you were a great lawyer you could become a partner and that was all that mattered, but the business case now requires showing the ability to retain or procure new clients,’ explains Lennon. ‘It requires an element of business development and acumen. In terms of access to the most significant client relationships for the firm, if you are not presented with those opportunities, there is really no

chance of advancement. That is why it is so critical that women and other diverse lawyers are given this access. Law firms are businesses and being able to show client generation is key.’

Lennon’s statements are in response to the question as to why Weil is placing specific emphasis on pitch activity as part of its endeavours to advance and retain female lawyers. As part of its research, TOWER canvassed a wide range of female lawyers within the firm, reviewed exit interviews, and drew on external market data. Overall, what the taskforce found was that access to business development was noted by female lawyers as a key area in which improvements could be made to aid their success – hence Weil’s focus on gender diversity in client pitching.

‘The inclusion and participation in client development and business generation is a crucial factor determining compensation, advancement, and selection for key management positions

at all top firms,’ adds Moore. ‘Pitching is one element of that business development and client development effort. Plus, pitches are quantifiable and measure progress, so we can assess where we are making changes in that area.’

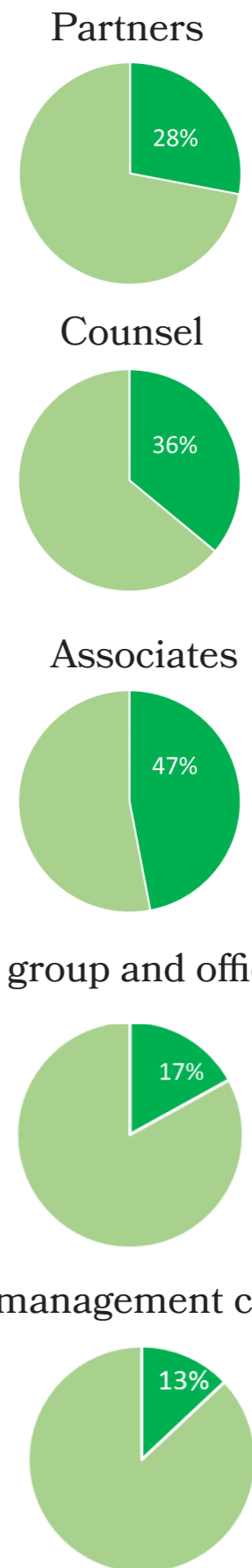
The obvious next question is what the firm is doing to address this. Is it simply a matter of adding women to pitch teams to balance them out, or is there a more developed thought process behind what is being done at Weil?

The starting point for the firm was to measure existing involvement in pitching to set a baseline. Weil also completed research into client team dynamics to ensure it had the knowledge needed to create future pitch teams that would be the most successful.

Following this, the firm addressed the need for ‘a broader education about the importance of diversity in pitch teams,’ says Moore. This was largely accomplished through a one-on-one series of discussions to raise visibility among male – and female – partners about some of the female partners in other practice groups, departments, and offices that could potentially add value to their pitch teams.

‘It has been an internal education process,’ adds Lennon. ‘If the default was for a male partner or a non-diverse partner

Women at Weil – the US numbers:



to pitch with people they were familiar with – with no malicious intent, but simply because they knew the person’s style or had a familiarity with their approach – we wanted to highlight other partners who could bring the same expertise and who had done really well pitching to other clients.’ Lennon does not downplay the time and effort this took. ‘It required a lot of those types of discussions on a daily basis, as well as Meredith and I presenting in practice group and department lunches about these efforts and recounting some of the successes so that people understood what was going on

and realised that they should be a part of it.’

Moore and Lennon spearhead the efforts as the leaders of the diversity and business development teams respectively, and collaboration between teams and professionals within the firm is a key component. Moore highlights the involvement of the business development team as a key component of their success: ‘It has been a critical element to our diversity strategy that business development has a seat at the table. Our business development team provides so much insight into what clients

Snapshot: Measuring success

- Overall change in female participation in client pitches
↑ by 69.4%
- Increase in pitches led by female partners
12.8% → 20%
- Increase in retention rate in new pitch opportunities involving female partners
17% → 27.2%
- Increase in retention rate in female-led pitch opportunities
18.2% → 30.6%

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are thinking and into how we can ensure our diverse attorneys are getting the visibility they need to be seen as thought leaders and the next generation of leaders at the firm.’

Results to date

‘We are really proud and think it has been a terrific success,’ says Lennon. Weil measures the related outcomes against the baselines set in 2014 – before TOWER and Weil’s ramped-up focus on advancing women within the firm.

Moore outlines the impressive results they have seen to date: ‘We have increased participation in client pitches by female partners by 69.4%. Pitches led by female partners increased from 12.8% to 20% of all new pitches. In terms of really looking at success, the retention as counsel increased from 17% to 27.2% in new pitch opportunities involving female partners. We were also retained as counsel in 30.6% of female-led pitch opportunities, which was an increase from 18.2%.’

And while clients may not be overtly aware of Weil’s exact strategy to include women in pitch activity, they have taken note and have commented on the impressive diversity of Weil’s teams. ‘This is an initiative that has, largely, been invisible to our clients until now,’ confirms Moore, ‘but we have had countless examples of feedback from individual pitch teams and also, really importantly, from the resulting client service teams because of the diversity of those teams.’

Significantly, the inclusion of more women in pitch teams is having a meaningful knock-on effect on the resulting teams actually completing the client work. ‘This isn’t about tokenism, there is a critical mass of diversity on most of the pitch teams as well as the resulting client teams,’ explains Moore. ‘And that is what we have had client feedback about – the quality and quantity of women, and also the broader diversity, on these teams – as it is very noticeable to both male and female clients compared to what they see from some other firms.’

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‘Anyone who is participating in a pitch is adding substantively to that pitch,’ states Lennon. ‘They are not just there to showcase that we have diversity in our partnership, they are substantially participating.’

It may be difficult for Weil to directly attribute female retention and promotion rates to its focus on client acquisition and development via pitch activity, but Moore and Lennon point out that the number of women who stay at Weil and advance to leadership positions has been increasing. Moore notes specifically that ‘45% of new partner promotions have been women’ in recent years’.

‘Looking at the longer term trajectory,’ she says, ‘we are not just looking at helping to advance a few of our women partners, but advancing the vast majority of our women partners in terms of helping

them build their business and build their brands both internally and externally.’

Wider efforts

Moore and her team keep intersectionality in mind in their pitching and wider diversity efforts with a view to ensuring that successful programmes for one group can be offered for others if appropriate. ‘We have been particularly focused on women of colour, and are also looking at the intersection of LGBTQ individuals and women. These are things we are looking at in terms of our pitches and also all of our other efforts.’

‘We have held bi-annual women of colour breakfasts, we have had a series over the last two years where we have looked at intersectional clients, and we also hosted a client event for the “Harriet” movie screening with our black affinity group

and our women affinity group. Our most recent pilot with associates included 50% women of colour so we are looking at ways in which we can move the needle within our diversity of women and diversity within each of our affinity groups.’

The emphasis on gender diversity in pitching feeds into the broader focus on women within the firm. With TOWER overseeing all women’s initiatives within Weil, it has piloted and developed numerous programmes directed at the female associate and partner populations of the firm. This has included piloting a number of leadership development programmes.

‘One is a programme that included executive coaching and opportunities to connect women across offices and departments,’ says Moore. ‘We have also piloted a programme among senior associates from which we have now had 100%

promotions from the participants within that group. We will be broadening that out to a larger group of women as well as other diverse associates and counsel who are partners of the future.’

‘An outcome of that was seeing the power of executive coaching and we wanted to make that more readily available, and also cover a broader array of issues such as career management, business development, and people management. We started offering on-demand coaching – six hours of training that is available to all of our associates each year – which we have had an incredible response to.’

‘We also have mentoring circles with one male and one female partner with a group of five to six associates. About a third of these are women associates only. They have been just as important for peer mentoring as for partners mentoring associates, as well as in ensuring our leaders understand the particular issues facing women within the firm.’

And again the strategy towards promoting female success links back to business development, as illustrated when Moore notes some additional efforts her team is leading: ‘We have, with business development, already held two Women@Weil partner and client retreats, with another one planned for this year. We have focused a lot on business development through events, both in terms of women connecting with other women, but also recognising that our women partners probably have more male clients than female clients and that it is helpful for us to find ways for them to connect. We are also enabling our male partners who have female clients to connect them to our female partners and associates.’

‘We have worked very hard to showcase our women leaders through media, awards, panel discussions and other external efforts, in addition to pitches. For example, more than one-third of our firm awards and accolades were received by women last

year, and 45% of all of our award nominations in 2019 were for women lawyers. We have had a series of different panels and programmes to highlight the amazing women leaders across the firm to show all the different paths to the top and really allow women who are starting off their careers to learn from their experiences and backgrounds.’

Competitive advantage

The focus on developing and promoting women within the firm has helped Weil with recruiting female talent at all levels. As Moore confirms, ‘it helps in terms of recruiting in law schools, and we are also looking at how we are recruiting at the lateral associate and lateral partner levels. Many of our gains for women partners are happening simultaneously through lateral promotion as well as through internal promotion, which is important if we want to move the number in terms of women in the partnership.’

The unique approach to pitching is an area in which

Moore and Lennon believe Weil stands out from its competitors. ‘Obviously every firm knows that diversity is important. It is important to clients who are being vocal about it, which is great. We took a disciplined and structured approach with metrics earlier than other firms. We can really tell at a client level, at an office level, and at every level of management how many people who are pitching are diverse. So, I think that is really the key differentiator,’ says Lennon.

Moore adds: ‘I think the emphasis on pitch teams and the resulting client teams, as well as looking at opportunities for women partners to engage with male clients, is something that is unique at our law firm. Tying our results to numbers has also really mattered. We don’t just do programmes and events and hope that it works, we measure it to see if it works and, if it doesn’t, we look at how we can retool it to make it more effective in the future.

And if it does work, we look to see how we can broaden those successful efforts so we can impact more people within the firm.’

And Weil is looking to push their efforts further in recognition of the fact that standing out on this issue in comparison to their fellow law firms or current market numbers for female partnership is still not enough. ‘While I believe Weil is leading the market, using other law firms as a benchmark is a pretty low bar,’ Moore says. Instead the firm aims to match female representation in law school graduating classes. ‘What we are trying to do is ensure our proportion of women over time by measuring throughout the entire pipeline from entry point to the top. Increasing from 20% to 28% female partners in about five years is a pretty notable increase, but we are aiming for 47% which is what is coming out of law schools. That is the number we should be aiming for at all levels.’ ●