

Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Miller Canfield's Megan Norris

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The following is an excerpt from Law360.com. The original article can be found [here](#).

Megan P. Norris is a principal in Miller Canfield PLC's Detroit office. She chairs the firm's managing directors and leads the firm's employment and labor group. She counsels her clients on all day-to-day employment matters, ranging from helping to determine appropriate discipline to advising them on conducting sexual harassment investigations to developing plans of action for handling difficult employees. In the courtroom, she defends her clients against employment-related claims, including discrimination, harassment, tort claims such as intentional infliction of emotional distress and defamation. She also provides training on the Americans With Disabilities Act and the Family and Medical Leave Act, as well as such areas as discipline and discharge and sexual harassment.

Q: How did you break into what many consider to be an old boys' network?

A: To be honest, I just never thought about it that way. It was clear to me that I was often the only woman in the room, but I did not act like I should be treated any differently, and ultimately most people didn't treat me any differently. That's not to say that I was one of the guys — I don't golf, drink beer after work, or do some of the other things that my male colleagues did together — but I did not make an issue of being a woman and acted like I didn't expect them to make an issue of it either.

Q: What are the challenges of being a woman at a senior level within a law firm?

A: The internal challenges are diminishing with time. Most of my male colleagues grew up in an environment where women are equal; their mothers and their spouses are often professional women, and it is a nonissue for them. There are still some who aren't used to dealing with professional women, but not so many these days. Historically, practice development was challenging because it was awkward to have dinner with male clients, but more and more of our clients are female so that is less and less of a barrier as well. Externally, the challenges of work-life balance are still immense. I think my male colleagues also have some of these tensions, but it seems that the duties of child-rearing (and the strong emotional need to handle those duties personally) still fall much more on women. Because advancement often requires an "all-in" attitude, it is still much harder for women to advance.

Q: Describe a time you encountered sexism in your career and tell us how you handled it.

A: My most memorable incident did not involve me as an attorney, but rather me as a client. My parents were having their will done just after I got married. I had decided to keep my maiden name, but the attorney drafting the will insisted that although I might still be using my name professionally, my legal name had changed. Notwithstanding my confirmation that my name had not changed, he insisted on giving them a will in which all of their worldly goods are left to my brother and a woman who does not exist.

Several years later, an attorney referred a woman to me because she needed advice on how to keep her name. The attorney was dumbfounded that all you need to do to keep your name is ... not change it. In all of these situations, I try very hard not to take offense and not to attribute any improper motive to the person, but also to not apologize for what I am doing or suggest that their position is understandable. I try to just laugh and educate at the same time.

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Q: What advice would you give to an aspiring female attorney?

A: For anyone, female or otherwise, choices have to be made. We need to understand what those choices are — Do I live close to the office so I can spend more time at work and still have time at home? Do I use day care or have a nanny or stay home part-time? Do I have dinners with my family or spend my evenings on practice development? How many hours do I work? — but also understand the ramifications of the choices. Less commitment almost always equals less money and a longer track for advancement. These ramifications are not unreasonable; law firms are businesses and are paid in large part based on how hard attorneys work. So we need to make the choices and then be comfortable with the ramifications.

Q: What advice would you give to a law firm looking to increase the number of women in its partner ranks?

A: The “all or nothing” approach really hurts women in law firms. While it is perfectly reasonable to pay someone less who cannot give as much time, law firms often go beyond the economic adjustment and make a value determination. There are plenty of women who are willing to work very hard, are very capable, and bring real talents. But there aren’t so many women who have a nonworking spouse taking care of everything on the home front. If a woman is performing high-level work, is economically profitable, and acts like an owner of the firm (i.e., is not just focusing on the billable hour and waiting for others to develop business), that woman should be considered for advancement even if she does not fit the cookie-cutter mold. There are plenty of men who do not bill 1,800 hours a year but are very highly compensated because they bring in business or have recognized valuable expertise, but when women do not hit such hours targets it is blamed on “priorities.”

Q: Outside your firm, name an attorney you admire and tell us why.

A: As a young lawyer, I really admired Kathleen McCree Lewis (now deceased). She came from a tremendous legal family (Her father was Wade McCree, the first black solicitor general of the United States, among other things), was married to a high-powered attorney, and rose to a high level at Dykema Gossett, a major Detroit law firm. Ultimately, she was nominated to the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals but died before she was confirmed. She was very successful in what was then a predominantly male corporate environment, but she always conducted herself with remarkable class and grace, and she raised terrific children.