

Originally published by



In Their Own Words: Being A Woman In BigLaw

By Cara Bayles | October 18, 2020

How Firms Fall Short

I spent many weekends at the firm — I was a young married professional, so there was no reason I shouldn't be working every Saturday, right? — and I would see little kids running all over the building. And the [mothers] who didn't do that were mommy-tracked.

I'm not bashing Akin Gump. I had great male mentors. I don't want to leave the impression they said, "Oh, she's a woman. Let's push her down."

When I was starting my journey to have a family, it was very clear to me that there was no way I could continue a sophisticated practice and rise up to equity partner — which was my goal — and also raise my kids.

I stepped back from BigLaw and focused on raising these babies. Then obviously I missed the practice. I was hired as COO of a cloud-based firm. It was a good opportunity for me, but that law firm is owned by two men, and I didn't have much autonomy or power. Basically, I was marginalized, and was told, "If you think you can do this a better way, you should go do that."

So we are called "Culhane Meadows: A Better Way." I couldn't help myself.

What BigLaw Can Do

Hiring women and diverse candidates out of law school is great, but until you fix your compensation structure, you're not going to retain these people.

Firms need to rethink how compensation is determined. And they need to reject this traditional black box decision-making process where the compensation committees are behind closed doors. It's secretive, it's very subjective, and it directly contributes to the gender pay gap.

At our firm, the compensation structure is 100% objective. It's literally a formula. We don't have billable quotas and we also don't set their billing rate. If you bring in a piece of work, you bring home 80% of every dollar collected. And because we path such a large percentage of every dollar collected to the people doing the work, they don't have to take on as many cases. They don't have to work as hard.

Until you recognize work-life balance, women are going to be forced out, because let's face it, we are literally having the babies. It's not like we can delegate that responsibility. And a lot of women want to spend time with their kids.

Advice For Female Attorneys

There was one time when a male partner came round and said to the guys, "Let's go! We're going golfing." And I said, "We are?" And he said, "Uh, do you golf?" And they're all laughing and walking toward the elevator. And I said, "I don't golf, but I can drive the cart." They didn't know what to say, so off I went. I drove the cart.

You have got to insert yourself if you feel there's an old boys' network. Because what do you think happens when they golf? They talk about clients, they talk about business, and they pass the clients down to these guys.

My advice would be: If you're in BigLaw now as a woman, get close to the partners who have the clients, and ask to be introduced. Take on projects where you are actually getting face time with clients. If you're getting the research projects, and your male counterpart is going golfing and getting drinks, you are not going to elevate in the ranks.



[Kelly Rittenberry Culhane](#) is a co-founder of Culhane Meadows PLLC. Kelly is a sharp mind and steady hand that clients can rely on during times of corporate crisis. Having spent the first half of her career as a trial lawyer, she is both tenacious and result-oriented when called upon to reduce her clients' legal and financial exposure through complex negotiations.

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The largest woman-owned national full-service business law firm in the U.S., Culhane Meadows fields over 70 partners in ten major markets across the country. Uniquely structured, the firm's Disruptive Law® business model gives attorneys greater work-life flexibility while delivering outstanding, partner-level legal services to major corporations and emerging companies across industry sectors more efficiently and cost-effectively than conventional law firms. Clients enjoy exceptional and highly-efficient legal services provided exclusively by partner-level attorneys with significant experience and training from large law firms or in-house legal departments of respected corporations. U.S. News & World Report has named Culhane Meadows among the country's "Best Law Firms" in its 2014 through 2020 rankings and many of the firm's partners are regularly recognized in Chambers, Super Lawyers, Best Lawyers and Martindale-Hubbell Peer Reviews.