

Valuable Advice for Women in Law

Written By **Melissa Forshey Schwind** (mfschwind@wardandsmith.com)

December 23, 2020



In recent years, efforts to recruit and retain more women in the legal profession have started to *slowly* move the needle towards a more diverse and inclusive workplace.

In fact, there are now more women in law school than ever before, accounting for 52% of all students in 2018.

However, there is more work to do within the walls of law

firms.

Ward and Smith actively empowers women as part of our Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives, which include outreach to local law schools. The firm recently held a virtual panel on December 2 for Wake Forest University School of Law students looking to glean advice to help them navigate their future legal careers.

Reflecting on the value of co-worker relationships, Devon Williams remarked to the more than a dozen future attorneys, “It’s more important to enjoy the folks I’m working with than necessarily the exact type of law that I practice.” Williams reminded the group that the practice of law is still a person-centered profession, and spending time around colleagues you like is key.

Joining Williams in offering insights were attorneys Joanne Badr Morgan, Amy Wang, and Amy Wooten. Family law attorney Juliana Inman moderated the online forum hosted for the University’s Women in Law group. All were eager to share important lessons they learned along the way, tackling issues such as finding the right legal path, diversity in law, women in leadership roles, and the elusive work-life balance.

Finding the Right Fit

When it comes to finding your place in the legal field, one-size definitely does not fit all.

According to Wooten, a litigator in the firm’s Raleigh office, it’s important to “find what you enjoy and what suits your skill set” in terms of determining the area of law you want to practice after law school. It also helps to keep an open mind.

Williams noted that the desire to have a job working with people you like was a deciding factor in the path she took.

“I never thought I would do labor and employment prior to going to law school... but the more I learned, I knew that it would provide me with the right balance,” stated Williams, who described her path into labor and

employment law as “very organic.”

She participated in Ward and Smith’s Summer Associate program, on-boarded after graduation, and continued to develop and maintain her professional relationships, which ultimately led to a position as Co-Managing Director within the firm.

And as students explore legal career options, the panel also suggested considering what size of a firm best suits your personality, interests, and goals. For Wooten, who has worked at a boutique and a large firm, the size of a firm does matter.

“I really wanted to find a firm that would allow me to have good resources to do really good work for my clients, but also feel like I was part of the organization and a valuable member of it.” Wooten continued, “I was really looking for somewhere that had a small to midsize fit to have that community experience.”

Adding more insight to the process of finding the right fit, commercial real estate attorney Badr Morgan reminisced about her experience interviewing with Ward and Smith more than six years ago before joining from another firm. The Asheville lawyer noted that some things can't be found on a resume.

"Are you kind? Easy to talk to? Can you make eye contact? What are your thoughts on the world?" Badr Morgan continued, "You understand that the firm set up this interviewing process because they care about personality. Everyone is getting to know you, so that if you get the job, then there's more of a likelihood that there's going to be a lot of meshing and the firm's culture will be strengthened."

Women in Law

As the discussion continued, Inman turned to the topic of women in law. A timely issue, considering that a 2019 Survey Report from the National Association of Women Lawyers found “the progress women have made in law firms over the last decade has been slow and incremental at best, and law firms continue to face challenges supporting and promoting women and diverse attorneys.”

Wang, an environmental attorney in Ward and Smith’s New Bern office and co-chair of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Advisory Group, characterized the firm’s DEI efforts as “growing.”

"In reflecting our size and our numbers, we realized that we had quite a few female attorneys across five offices. We wanted to identify a way to connect all of us together and provide some way to support each other in regards to where we are in our careers, and in our lives," remarked Wang.

Pre-COVID, the firm’s female attorneys met to discuss day-to-day issues and challenges that affected women in the legal profession. Without that option since COVID-19 impacted firm gatherings, the DEI Advisory Group has been working to develop ways for more regular and virtual gatherings. This is an ongoing initiative for the firm. Wang remarked that Ward and Smith has always been supportive of women attorneys, noting that she was hired as a lateral over 16 years ago when she was visibly pregnant with her second child.

A similar story was told by Williams, who was nominated and elected earlier this year to the role of Co-Managing Director, starting in January 2021, when she too was pregnant. Ward and Smith now joins an elite rank of women-led firms. According to the American Bar Association, roughly 12 percent of top leadership positions at firms are held by women lawyers.

“I think it says something pretty amazing about our firm in particular,” noted Williams. “And surprising is not the right word. Surprising would imply that it’s out of the normal for Ward and Smith to promote women and support them in executive positions. That’s not the case. Ward and Smith, throughout my career, has lifted

me up.” In fact, Williams is the firm's second female Co-Managing Director after Jennifer Bowman who served from 2004 until she passed away in 2006.

Badr Morgan echoed Williams' sentiment, stating, “I felt like the older guys always championed me and treated me the way they wanted their daughter to be treated if she was a lawyer. I can actually forget that I’m a woman at work, and that’s the goal.”

Inman asked, “How has being a woman in a male-dominated profession molded your career and experience as an attorney?” Badr Morgan replied, “If anything, it made me want it more.” She credits being part of a generation where women before her already paved the way. Her advice to students is to “latch on to those individuals” and work with them as your mentors or use them as role models, and to “believe in yourself and your ability to attain your career goals.”

The Road to the Top

As the saying goes: a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. It’s a proverb that holds true as one begins their law career.

According to Wooten, landing a summer associate position or your first legal job starts with putting in the leg work and doing your homework.

“If you’re interviewing with a firm and get the details wrong on the kinds of practice groups they have or where they have offices, it’s probably not a great start to the process.” She urged students to pay attention to small details in their resumes and cover letters, stating “anything you can do to make yourself stand out is always a good start.”

When it comes to climbing the law firm ladder, attorneys stressed the importance of not only working hard but also being a team player.

Wooten, for example, joined the firm remotely as a lateral back in April, during the state's stay-at-home order. Despite meeting many colleagues for the first time via Zoom, her willingness to pitch in anywhere she could caught the attention of managers and co-workers.

“It wasn’t too long after I joined that they asked me to co-chair one of their practice groups, and that was a really humbling and honoring experience,” stated Wooten.

Another quality that’s important in any type of leadership role is one’s ability to listen, key to Williams as she prepares for her new role.

“If we don’t talk to our partners or colleagues to understand their perspective on something, then we’ll never succeed in a leadership position.”

The Elusive Work-Life Balance

“Can women have it all?” Wang asked rhetorically to the group when questioned about juggling the demands of practicing law and having a family. Badr Morgan, Wang, Williams, and Wooten are all mothers with very active practices.

Wang noted that although it’s not easy, it’s best to think about work and home life as a seesaw. “Just know that on very brief fleeting moments in your life, that seesaw will be balanced. One side is going to be down and one side is going to be up over the course of any given day, week, or month.”

Her advice is to manage your own expectations and to find your core values to help you stay centered. It is a process that requires re-evaluation over time.

“Deciding what you want out of your career, how you can best contribute to the firm-family as well as your own personal family, and finding what’s true to you is probably about as good as you can get it.”

--

© 2024 Ward and Smith, P.A. For further information regarding the issues described above, please contact Melissa Forshey Schwind.

This article is not intended to give, and should not be relied upon for, legal advice in any particular circumstance or fact situation. No action should be taken in reliance upon the information contained in this article without obtaining the advice of an attorney.

We are your established legal network with offices in Asheville, Greenville, New Bern, Raleigh, and Wilmington, NC.