

Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Snell & Wilmer's Barb Dawson

Law360, New York (February 21, 2014, 2:14 PM ET) -- Barbara J. Dawson is a partner in Snell & Wilmer's Phoenix office and co-chair of the firm's commercial litigation and international practices. She also serves on the firm's multi-office executive committee. She has more than 20 years of experience representing companies in complex business litigation and matters adverse to governmental entities including qui tam claims. She also has led internal investigations for Fortune 500 corporations and boards of directors involving domestic and international issues.

Dawson recently completed a term as chairwoman of the board of directors for Lex Mundi, an international affiliation of 160 independent law firms located in 100 countries. She currently serves in leadership of the American Bar Association's Section of Litigation. In her home state of Arizona, she has been recognized by the Greater Phoenix Chamber of Commerce as the Business Woman of the Year/Athena Award recipient, by the state bar foundation with its Distinguished Service/Walter E. Craig Award, and among the Best Arizona Attorneys for Commercial Litigation, International Trade and Finance Law.

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

A: Especially in my early years of practice, I was so busy just trying to do a good job with the opportunities provided to me, I didn't spend a lot of time focusing on whether there was a network that might not include me. Now, looking back, I realize that many of my best opportunities came from wonderful people who could have been labeled "old boys." In my experience, the labels that we might apply in the abstract don't really hold up when we work together one-on-one.

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

A: I am willing to guess that no one at a senior — or any — level within a law firm has time for all that they value and want to do. Snell & Wilmer's credo focuses on service to our clients, each other and our communities. I strive to keep a healthy balance of the three. And I constantly want to do more in all three areas, but am constrained by the pesky limit of hours in the day.

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

A: I've come to believe that some encounters that might be labeled as sexism are, at the core, misunderstandings about goals and expectations. As a woman who has practiced law for 25 years, I most certainly have encountered times when others have assumed that I was less interested in a career than I am.

For example, I've had male attorneys ask why I would not prefer to be home with my child, or my favorite — why I would want to work so hard instead of having more time to shop and go to lunch, like his wife. In these circumstances, I've tried not to laugh, or take the comments as anything but well intended. But it has been important for me to speak up, make my professional goals very clear and proactively address any misunderstandings as to what I want. That seems to work with the good guys, and there are many good guys out there.

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

A: I think there has never been a better time to be a woman lawyer, and the opportunities are just going to continue to expand. I would encourage any aspiring female attorney to set big goals, embrace hard work and move toward the best teammates who you can find. By doing so, I think an attorney positions herself well to be the “go to” person when the great opportunities come along. My mentors taught me that there is the potential to learn from everyone and all experiences, and that the best opportunities often come in delightful ways when least expected. But we need to be there, in the room, working hard and well with others, when those opportunities arise.

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

A: Firms looking to increase the number of women in their partnership ranks should start by focusing on retention. There is plenty of room within most partnerships to include a mix of people with different contributions. I think we will see the creativity of firms in offering alternative paths continue to expand, as the percentages of talented women in the profession continues to grow.

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

A: I admire United States District Judge for the District of Arizona, Roslyn Silver. She has successfully navigated substantial challenges in the profession with intelligence, grace and humor. She also is highly driven to bring out the best in those around her. It doesn't get much better than that.

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