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Women In Insurance Law On Breaking Down Barriers

By **Hope Patti**

Law360 (March 7, 2024, 4:35 PM EST) -- Building a better environment for women in the legal industry starts from the top, women in insurance law told Law360, underscoring the importance of mentorship, individuality and promoting women to leadership positions.

To mark International Women's Day, both junior and senior women attorneys share their experiences in the industry and offer words of advice.

Jodi Green

Insurance law can provide a multitude of opportunities for young lawyers just starting out in their careers, Jodi Green, who currently serves as counsel at Feldman Legal Advisors PLLC, said.

With her years of experience in insurance law, Green is now in the process of launching her own firm, where she hopes to encourage authenticity.

One of the challenges women in law may face is the "old boys' club" culture at some firms, Green said, which caused her to create an identity that was not true to herself.

"I, as a young lawyer, and for most of my career, postured myself in a way to model after the men that were ... sort of the rainmakers," she said. "I believed, and I think I was taught, you have to act a certain way in order to get clients or to be successful.

"I think that was a huge detriment to me, honestly, and I've spent the last part of my career unwinding that," Green said. But, in unwinding that belief, Green said she has been able to bring in clients who appreciate her authenticity as a woman.

Creating a better environment for women in law, and empowering them to embrace their identity, has to start from the top down, she said.

"There have to be more women in positions of authority, who are leading teams and mentoring people, and those women leaders need show the younger lawyers that they can be true to themselves," Green said. "The industry isn't going to change unless the people at the top are actually modeling different behaviors and are being true to themselves, acknowledging the strength of their femininity and the benefits of those qualities."

Robin Cohen

As chair of the New York City-based Cohen Ziffer Frenchman and McKenna, Robin Cohen said it is important to have a diverse team with different perspectives and ideas.

"We tend to attract a very diverse group," Cohen said. "I think we're able to attract some of the best women in the city and in the country, actually ... because they see women in leadership positions."

Cohen began her career at Anderson Kill, which she said she gravitated toward because the firm was committed to giving women and minorities opportunities. But that was not, and still is not, the case everywhere, she said.

"All of that, what I would call noise, completely goes away when [attorneys] come here. It's a pure meritocracy," Cohen said. "No one feels that subtlety that they had felt at larger firms, and part of it is because there's a lot of women in leadership positions."

"If you want to develop a great firm, and a great firm with great women, it's not enough to hire a lot of women, you have to put them in actual leadership positions," she added. "And you have to make sure when you're doing compensation, that you're fair."

In addition to putting more women in leadership roles, Cohen said it is important to teach female attorneys how to develop business and encourage them to do so.

Cohen said she will often bring associates and partners to pitches, and now a number of them are doing pitches on their own.

"I'm very supportive of them starting to grow their own practice and bring in their own business. That's very empowering, and I do not believe as many firms are doing that," she said. "The more empowered women feel, and the more they feel they're at a firm that's going to support them in that regard, the more you're going to keep them and the more they're going to bring in business."

Having been recognized as an influential woman in law, Cohen hopes to serve as a role model and convey that it is possible to have a great career and a great family, said the Cohen Ziffer chair, who is married with two children.

"When I was a junior associate, a lot of the women who were more senior were not on the top of the compensation chart, a lot of them didn't have families," Cohen said. "So I do think that I represent to many women that ... you can have a family, you can have a life outside of work, and still be successful and be at the pinnacle of your practice."

Andrea Jung

Andrea Jung, an associate at Cohen Ziffer, said she chose to join the firm in 2022 due in part to the fact that it is woman-led.

But generally, there is still disparity when it comes to management and leadership roles at law firms, she said.

"It's getting better, but I think we definitely have a pipeline problem," she said, noting that even though more female students are graduating from law school, female attorneys are still underrepresented compared to their male counterparts.

"I think there's definitely implicit bias and stereotyping going on, and a lot of times I think female attorneys are underestimated," Jung said. While it can be exciting to dispel that belief, she said, it also puts a lot of pressure on female attorneys.

"Having a community of female lawyers is very helpful," she added. "I think having that community is key. That way you can brainstorm and share your issues and have that emotional support around you."

Building connections with both superiors and colleagues is also important, Jung said, especially for those who are just starting out in their careers.

Joan D'Ambrosio

As the founding partner of a majority women-owned firm, Joan D'Ambrosio said Atheria Law is focused on diversity and creating opportunities for women to develop their careers.

"We value diversity as one of our core values and spend a lot of time trying to work on ways that we can recruit and support women, both inside and outside of our firm," D'Ambrosio said.

Atheria Law's clients, including insurers and reinsurers, also mirror those values, she said.

"We have clients really focused on the diversity of their team, including increasing numbers of women. So that really helps us reflect that back," D'Ambrosio said. Having clients that are responsive to and supportive of a diverse team has enabled the firm to provide attorneys with more leadership opportunities and the chance to have a more visible presence on a team, she added.

"I think all of that creates more of an investment in the person. That's what we always try to do: Invest in the person, in their career, and give them the ability to value that and prioritize it because they're getting that type of profile and hopefully satisfaction out of it," D'Ambrosio said. "I think that's something we can all do to continue to encourage underrepresented classes, including women, and to sort of break down some of those barriers."

Breaking down barriers also includes placing a greater emphasis on flexibility in the workplace and promoting work-life balance, especially in a world where immediate responses are an expectation, D'Ambrosio said.

"I think that many law firms continue to lose women when they become more senior if they lack flexibility. It isn't always true that women are taking on more responsibilities outside of work, but it certainly can be.

Having practiced law for more than 30 years, D'Ambrosio said she is a major proponent of mentorship, which is something that was incredibly beneficial to her when she was starting her career.

"My biggest advice is always look for people around you, within your firm and outside your firm, that you think you can ask for advice and ask them to help you sort of forge a path. I think that there's a huge desire on the part of more senior women to do that," she said.

Donna Thomisee

To Donna Thomisee, a shareholder at Lugenbuhl Wheaton Peck Rankin & Hubbard, mentoring younger attorneys not only provides an opportunity to impart professional wisdom but to also share life lessons.

"I have the benefit of people before me and I want to pass that knowledge on, but also pave the way for people to recognize it's OK to make deviations from your initial career choice," Thomisee said.

After the birth of her first child, Thomisee said she stepped back from her job at a law firm to be a stay-at-home mom, where she ran her own practice doing contract work like taking depositions and drafting coverage opinions. Having the flexibility to make her own work schedule while taking care of her children was the "best of both worlds," she said.

"You have to do what's happy for you because that's what makes your life better. Don't feel like you have to be pigeonholed into one stereotype or the other," Thomisee added.

Another piece of advice Thomisee offers to younger attorneys is not to take things personally.

"Sometimes you are going to run into people who are jerks — men and women," she said. "Don't take it personally. It's a reflection on them, not on you."

Though she said her advice is applicable to all, there is one situation specific to women.

"I don't know of a single female attorney that has been doing this for any length of time, that has not been mistaken for the court reporter at a deposition or the secretary in an office. That is something that young men attorneys do not experience as much," Thomisee said.

But she urged female attorneys not to be discouraged or offended by other people's assumptions.

"Know your own self-worth," Thomisee said. "Even if they think you are not the attorney it doesn't matter because a court reporter is just as important as the person asking the questions."

--Editing by Amy Rowe.