

Ask Pat

Dear Pat:

In your previous article, you wrote that some corporations are encouraging diversity in outside law firms by basing their decision to use those firms on the diversity of the firm's lawyers. You also mentioned that Shell Oil Company requires the outside law firms it uses to report the number of women in the firm and the amount of Shell's work that is done by those lawyers and awards the bulk of its work to firms with diversity and good lawyers. I was wondering whether there is some way to monitor diversity in New Mexico law firms and other venues?

Sincerely,
Curious in Las Cruces

Dear Curious:

The State Bar of New Mexico maintains statistics on the areas of employment of its 4,924 in-state, active members, 1,754 of whom are women. The most recent statistics reveal some interesting information. For example, of the 3,368 attorneys in private practice, female attorneys are fairly evenly distributed among firms of varying sizes. For example, 30 percent of solo practitioners are women, 36 percent of lawyers in firms with 20 to 49 attorneys are women and 31 percent of lawyers in law firms with more than 50 attorneys are women. Unfortunately, the State Bar does not keep statistics on the number of female partners in private firms, which would better indicate whether women are making progress on the partnership track.

Generally speaking, there are higher percentages of women in the government and corporate arenas than in private law firms. Of the 1,276 attorneys in the public sector, 38 to 48 percent of those attorneys are women, with the higher percentages working in the larger offices of 20 plus attorneys. Of the 115 attorneys practicing in the corporate arena, women make up 33 percent of the corporate offices with one attorney; 46 percent of those with two to four attorneys; 67 percent of those with five to nine attorneys; and 50 percent of those with 10-19 attorneys.

Most surprising is the percentage of women lawyers working for legal service providers. Of the 58 active lawyers in that area, women make up 80 percent of the attorneys in offices with 10-19 lawyers; 71 percent in offices with five to nine attorneys; 44 percent in offices with two to four attorneys, and constitute 100 percent of offices with one attorney.

There is an ongoing discussion at the national level on why women are not as well represented in private law firms as in other practice areas. The theories, many of which have been addressed in this column, range from women choosing to opt-out of the law firm career track to women being held back or even forced off the career track by discriminatory practices.

Sincerely,
Pat



Ask Pat is a feature provided by the Committee on Women and the Profession. This is a question and answer column with a twist – “Pat” will answer questions about gender bias in the legal profession. All of the letters are loosely based on real events. Readers are invited to send their comments or letters to “Ask Pat,” State Bar of New Mexico, PO Box 92860, Albuquerque, NM 87199-2860. “Pat” responses are provided by members of the committee.