

Ask Pat

Dear Pat:

There has been a lot of discussion lately, by you and others, that in spite of great progress, women are still hitting (and sometimes cracking) their heads on the glass ceiling. Although women have made great strides in the legal profession and elsewhere, they are not making partner or otherwise advancing in their law firms at the rate that would be expected given the number of women who have graduated from law school.

Although I understand the reasons why are a matter of debate, it seems to me this situation would change if law firms were persuaded that it was in their economic interest to remove the glass ceiling. Do you agree and if so, do you have any ideas on how to accomplish this?

Sincerely,
Hard Hat Hannah

Dear Hannah:

I agree wholeheartedly with your suggestion and I understand that some corporations are doing just that in an effort to encourage diversity in law firms. In the December 2004 edition of the *ABA Journal*, I read with interest an article about the efforts by corporations to increase diversity in the outside law firms they use.

Legal officers from hundreds of major corporations have signed pledges, most recently in 2004, calling for companies to base their decisions to use outside law firms “in significant part” on diversity and to end or limit their relationship with firms that fall short.

Even more impressive are the actions of companies like Shell Oil Co. and its general counsel, Catherine Lamboley. Ms. Lamboley tracks the demographics of outside law firms by requiring them to report the number of women and minority lawyers and the amount of Shell’s work that was done by those lawyers. As a result, Shell cut the number of outside firms it uses from the hundreds to about 27 it calls strategic partners — those firms and a few others get the bulk of Shell’s work.

Significantly, Ms. Lamboley says that the next logical step is to track the advancement of women and minorities into partnership and management positions at those firms.

While it is disturbing to me that law firms require this kind of not-so-gentle nudging to become more diverse, I am encouraged by the actions of these major corporations. If this continues, and it looks like it will, it may be that economic necessity will break the glass ceiling for many women lawyers.

Sincerely,
Pat

P.S. Pat would like to remind readers to join the Committee on Women and the Legal Profession and the Northern New Mexico Women’s Bar Association for full-day seminar, Workplace Dynamics and the Practice of Law, starting at 9 a.m., April 8 at the State Bar Center. The seminar will be worth 3.2 general, 2.0 professional and 1.2 ethics MCLE credits.



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.