

Law360

December 4, 2013

Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Hunton & Williams' Lisa Sotto



Lisa J. Sotto is managing partner of Hunton & Williams LLP's New York office, and head of the firm's global privacy and cybersecurity practice. She also co-founded a think tank within the law firm to influence global privacy policy. She deploys a team of partners, associates and other privacy and data security professionals reaching across the U.S., Europe and Asia to address regulatory, enforcement, and litigation risks, as well as threats to companies' systems, personal data, trade secrets, and other proprietary information.

Sotto was twice appointed by former Secretary Janet Napolitano as chairwoman of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Data Privacy and Integrity Advisory Committee, and previously was appointed vice chairwoman of the committee by Secretaries Tom Ridge and Michael Chertoff. She has advised more than 1,000 companies on information security breaches, and her clients have included six of the Fortune 10. This year, she was named to The National Law Journal's list of "100 Most Influential Lawyers."

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

A: For me, the trick was choosing niche areas that were not well established. I started as an environmental lawyer in 1987, and while it was not a new field at the time, it certainly was not a deeply established men's club. And then, transitioning into privacy law — a field that was absolutely untrodden at the time — meant that there was no "old boy's network." So for both of these areas, I didn't have to break in. I will say that, early in my career, I walked into many conference rooms in which I was the only female. But I was stunned just a couple of weeks ago to spend two hours in a conference room in which I was the only woman out of 15 people — that hadn't happened to me in years!

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

A: There are very few other women who are at the same level of seniority as I am. It would be nice if there were more, but it does not impact my ability to be successful. It also would be nice if there were more female role models — there are certainly fewer role models for women than men at the very senior levels. When I was moving up the ranks, I had few female mentors — many women of my vintage had to go it alone.

That said, I honestly feel that I have faced very few barriers. I just put blinders on, pushed the accelerator, and went for it. I think if you proceed confidently and don't acknowledge that anything might be amiss, then you can avoid getting mired down in self-doubt or perceived obstacles. Often, it's the management of the firm that facilitates the acceleration, and allows you to be self-confident. At Hunton & Williams, we have an atmosphere that is highly collegial and

very supportive of our lawyers, so there's no hindrance to moving forward as fast as you are able to go — whether you are female or male.

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

A: When I was a summer associate after my first year of law school at a now-defunct firm, my summer mentor, an elder male senior partner, said to me: “You know why women don't succeed? They have no pockets.” I actually repeat that line frequently now — I often give speeches and, when I wear a dress, I have no pockets, so I have no place to attach a lavalier mic!

The day I made partner, when I was four months pregnant with my first child, a male partner (long gone now) called me into his office and said, “I just found out you're pregnant,” to which I responded “Yeah, and?” He replied, “Well you know, you breached your fiduciary duty to the firm.” I asked (rather impolitely) what he was talking about, and he responded that “pregnancy is like a fatal disease.” I think I used a four-letter word in that conversation, but it didn't hinder me. I knew the firm would have gone to bat for me in a heartbeat had I repeated the story at the time, but I didn't because it was irrelevant. Each time, these instances were more a nuisance than anything else.

I do think the world has changed quite a bit — we are more comfortable in our own skin. We no longer have to wear the blue power suit uniform to be taken seriously. My advice: If you feel you are experiencing any sexism, deal with it head on, then put blinders on and march forward.

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

A: Be as great a lawyer as you can be and develop deep client relationships. If you can be viewed as a rainmaker, the world is your oyster. I think women often have an easier time developing relationships with clients. In-house legal departments are increasingly comprised of female lawyers, so the old boys' club has become an old girls' club in some ways. The key is to develop significant relationships with in-house counsel that are long-lasting. Women can have a bit of an advantage here in that we have an innate understanding of how to develop and maintain relationships. This helps in keeping client ties strong.

I don't want to give the impression that it isn't hard. I have three children, ages 18, 15 and 6. There is never down time. And maternity leave itself is not easy. Being out for three-month stints creates a difficult re-entry period. The first time, I really did take the full three months — no contact. The second time, two years later, I had more contact. But the third time, I essentially meshed my maternity leave with my work. I remember in the third month I billed 172 hours, so at a certain point, there is no ability to completely walk away. You can't just pull yourself out and expect that the practice will continue to be there when you return. You have to be able to integrate all aspects of your life, both personal and professional. And having a willing partner is crucial.

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

A: One thing I've observed is that the women who make partner are superstars, and already have established themselves as such. On the other hand, many of the men who make partner are often viewed as "future superstars," but may not yet have achieved superstar status. I think men are given the benefit of the doubt more so than women. So the advice would be to make sure you are identifying women partner candidates early on, nurturing them, and then giving them the benefit of the doubt when it comes time for the partnership decision. If you do that, there is no doubt they will shine.

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

A: JoAnn Stonier, executive vice president and chief information governance and privacy officer for MasterCard Worldwide, is a role model to us all. She manages to balance a high-pressure legal career with a teaching post at a local college and a sideline business as an interior designer. She is truly a Renaissance woman. At MasterCard, JoAnn is responsible for worldwide privacy compliance and information governance for the enterprise, as well as related regulatory engagement. She has managed single-handedly to reshape the company's information and data strategy so as to enable commerce in a manner that ensures products and services are designed with privacy as their foundation. JoAnn leads by example and inspires her team every day.