

WOMEN IN LAW

Solo or Small Practice

We talked to Joanne Elliott of Elliott & Associates and Shannon Nebolsky of Pioneer Patent, two women who have elected to practice law in firms that they founded.

Joanne Elliott, whose practice concentrates on matters concerning real estate tax assessments, started her firm 12 years ago with one partner, her husband. Prior to that she was employed by Attorneys' Title Guarantee Fund where she served as vice president and corporate counsel. When she left this relatively large firm, she joined her husband in his firm, McMahon & Elliott. The two then founded Elliott & Associates, which currently has three associates in addition to Elliott and her husband. Presently, all employees at this firm, except for her husband, are women!

Joanne elected to leave the larger firm despite its efforts to keep her by offering her a flexible schedule to accommodate her growing family. The lure of losing a two-hour daily commute and the urge to be self-employed won out.

We asked Joanne what advice she would offer to women just out of law school. Here's what she had to say.

- Don't go out on your own right away. Work for a firm where you can learn, pay your dues, work crazy hours, and make the right connections. This way, if you ever want to change your professional life to have children or work a less hectic schedule, you will have the skills, background, and connections to make the change, even go out on your own.
- Specialization is critical, so figure out early on where you want to make your mark in the legal community and go after it. Shannon Nebolsky is a patent attorney who is a sole practitioner. She founded Pioneer Patent LLC in mid - 2004 when she left an established, successful, mid-sized intellectual property boutique law firm in the loop to start her firm. Like many women, the driving force behind Shannon's decision to change her work life so drastically was a desire to be more involved as a parent with her grade school-aged children. Her spouse also had a challenging job at a large, multinational business consulting firm that required him to work 60-80 hours per week and travel. Shannon's life has changed significantly in many ways. Before leaving the boutique firm in the loop, Shannon had support in every area of her life. Because she made a good salary, she was able to hire help that not only took care of the children and the housekeeping and cooking.

This freed her to spend uninterrupted quality time with her children every day.

Another big change for Shannon has been the lack of support services at work. Before she founded Pioneer Patent, her employer offered her a full complement of support services. There were people that took care of administrative matters, docketing, billing, accounting, IT, data services, and copying, and she worked in a gorgeous downtown office space. Now she works a lot from home and has no support staff.

Her words of advice to other women thinking about making the leap into their own firm? Make sure you understand that what you are really doing is becoming an entrepreneur. Then make sure you understand all the challenges that go with that. It is truly an education. Happily Shannon has purged a lot of time-wasting habits from her life.

Working in a Large Firm: It's Not All Bad

We spoke to a few women lawyers who have made it to the top in the legal profession to get their take on what it is really like to work with, or at, a big law firm.

Jane DiRenzo Pigott founded R3Group LLC after decades as a lawyer, most recently at Winston Strawn where she was among the first woman equity partners. Now instead of practicing law she works with law firms and organizations looking at leadership issues and desiring to focus on diversity.

Women are well represented at law firms, but even though the pipeline is full, there has been no material progress in the top echelons of law firms for quite a while. Jane feels that to attribute this fact to women having children doesn't accurately tell the entire story. From her perspective a contributing fact is that law firms decide who is promoted and who isn't is based upon how well they demonstrate attributes of straight, white men. These attributes include self-promotion and participating in activities that many women opt out of. The simple truth is that clients, and their associated billings, get passed on in firms from partner to up and coming associates. And those associates that aren't like the model are not as readily in a position to inherit clients.

But, the news is not all bad. Many firms are starting to realize the value of investing in teaching lawyers how to develop new business and how to think more like entrepreneurs. There are many more women who are making it work on their own terms. Examples included prominent attorneys working a reduced schedule, yet retaining their equity partner status and firm and client leadership responsibilities. The biggest surprise of all is that men are starting to experience some of the same dissatisfaction and challenges faced by women, particularly the GenXer males. Many are predicting that the fact that men are

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A strange paradox is developing in the property tax field: property values - and tax assessments - are skyrocketing yet it is becoming more difficult to obtain assessment reductions than ever before. Why? Because information technology allows assessing officials to collect accurate, real-time valuation data and render more accurate assessments. Consequently, property owners need competent, aggressive attorneys who can think out of the box and successfully negotiate assessment reductions because the assessing officials know these attorneys are capable of winning their cases if they go to trial.

Elliott & Associates is a competent, aggressive law firm that focuses its practice on contesting assessments of commercial property, condominium associations and high-end residences. We employ attorneys who have successfully handled over 8,000 tax appeals since 1989.

Elliott & Associates has developed a state of the art case management system that allows us to manage a high volume of tax appeals efficiently and effectively on a consistent basis. We keep our clients informed regularly, and respond to inquiries immediately. Feel free to contact us to obtain a complementary evaluation of your property.



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beginning to challenge the old stereotypical white male machismo work ethic model of how to do business will force organizations to be more gender neutral and to look for new ways to achieve the business results they need.

Jennifer Bluestein was a dean's list graduate from a prestigious law school. After practicing law in a large firm for several years, she quit to return to her true mission. She had never intended on using her law degree in the actual practice of law, but had planned to work towards making the workplace better, especially for women. Now she's doing that at Baker & McKenzie LLP, where she was hired to oversee professional development for all attorneys.

Jennifer told us that many issues of women's dissatisfaction are generational issues. Currently her firm is revising their reduced-hours policy to become a "career options" policy. People are seeking increased career options due to child care, the need to care for parents, or simply life choices. Baker & McKenzie LLP wants to be the employer of choice for any talented, committed individual. The firm certainly seems to have all the right ingredients in place to help women succeed.

"I was amazed when I joined the firm two and a half years ago to see a Mother's Room, complete with sink, refrigerator, and commercial-grade breast pump installed," reports Jennifer.

"In addition, we have back-up childcare for all Chicago office employees, at no charge."

In the end, it may come down to how supportive your boss is and whether or not you have a mentor. Those without supportive bosses and mentors have a much tougher time

making it all work. That's why Baker & McKenzie works with all managers, whether attorneys or professional staff, to develop those relationships with the people they work with.

We asked the professionals and the consensus is in! There are three types of lawyers that every woman needs to develop a working relationship with.

- 1. A general practitioner to handle routine life matters and to introduce you to the specialists you will undoubtedly need to successfully negotiate life examples of specialists include:**
 - a. Patent lawyer
 - b. Real estate lawyer
 - c. Adoption lawyer
- 2. A specialist in estate planning and wills. This is one eventuality no one will avoid, so work with a specialist in this field to make sure your affairs are in order.**
- 3. A business/corporate lawyer to handle business affairs and simple contracts.**