

VIEW FROM THE TOP

Half of Illinois' 20 largest firms are headed by women – here's what they had to say

BY CHICAGO LAWYER STAFF





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Photo by Lisa Predko

When Baker & McKenzie managing partner Regine Corrado showed up for her first day at work at a small firm in Hamburg, Germany, she was shown her new desk — in the typing pool.

“They said, ‘We never had a female attorney, and we don’t think women should have offices, so here’s the typing pool,’” Corrado said.

In the late 1990s, then-associate Britt Miller was one of two women at a 25-person joint defense meeting at a law firm in Washington, D.C. The other woman was a paralegal.

“One of the men in the meeting turned, he had no idea who I was, and he asked me to get him a cup of coffee,” said Miller, who was named managing partner of Mayer Brown’s Chicago office in January. “I was a little taken aback but I thought ‘OK, fine. I was going to get a cup for myself. Not a big deal.’ I kind of laughed internally because it was going to be amusing when he finally realized who I was.”

Miller said it was amusing. And the man apologized profusely.

But being a woman in Big Law brings opportunity as well.

“I received a cold call from a woman in-house lawyer who knew of me by reputation and asked me to substitute in for the company’s long-standing class-action counsel in a major class action,” said Marci Eisenstein, managing partner of Schiff Hardin.

“The lawyer I was asked to replace was a male partner at a large firm who did not listen to his female client, who felt he knew better and who declined to work or consult with a female subject-matter expert the client had assigned to the team. The in-house counsel was tired of feeling marginalized and turned to me. I listened, worked with her and her team and it was the start of a 20-year relationship that continues through today.”

Ten of the 20 largest firms in Illinois — including five of the top 10 — have women as managing partner, partner-in-charge or co-managing partner of their Chicago offices. But those numbers aren’t reflected down the line, according to the results of Chicago Lawyer magazine’s 2019 Diversity Survey of the 100 largest firms in Illinois. You’ll find those results starting on Page 28.

We spoke to all 10 on topics ranging from the programs their firms offer to retain and promote women to their own experiences as women in law. Here’s what they had to say.

Quotes have been edited for length and clarity.

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GreenbergTraurig, co-managing shareholder of the Chicago office

I think overall, the most important thing is three words — opportunity, opportunity, opportunity. I think involving women and in pitches involving women in more high-profile projects, and more meaningful projects and cases, promoting them even maybe into better leadership positions. I think as women they want to succeed. And when they have those experiences, they draw more satisfaction from their job. I think it justifies the sacrifices that you have to make, male or female, to be in this profession. And so I really think the most important thing to do to retain and promote women, while you have to have all those programs, nobody in Big Law would not have all those programs, I think the more important thing is really to inspire and give women opportunities so they don't want to leave the profession, and so that there's career satisfaction.