

## Female Powerbrokers Q&A: White And Williams' Joan Rosoff

*Law360, New York (December 19, 2013, 2:07 PM ET)* -- Joan C. Rosoff is a partner in White and Williams LLP's Philadelphia office, where she co-chairs the firm's real estate and finance groups. She works with banking institutions, national insurance companies, private lenders and investors in all areas of real estate finance and other transactions. Recently, Rosoff represented a national banking institution in a series of syndicated mortgage loan transactions totaling in excess of \$200 million and involving 15 properties.

She also provides pro bono services to homeowners who need to adjust their mortgage loans to remain in their homes through her service for the Philadelphia County Mortgage Foreclosure Diversion Project. In addition, she is an active participant in the Logan Square Neighborhood Association and the Bicycle Coalition of Philadelphia. Rosoff served as president of CREW Network, an international real estate organization, and remains active in the organization.

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

A: I didn't break into the old boys' network, I developed my own. Early in my career I joined CREW Network, an international real estate organization whose mission is to help women achieve parity in the commercial real estate industry. It is a multidisciplinary organization, meaning it is not just lawyers who belong.

Through my participation in CREW Network I developed skills I've used throughout my career — leadership, public speaking and interpersonal communication, in addition to networking and business development. It allowed me to develop the skills men often learn culturally from mentors or because they have more opportunities from male relationships that women, when a minority in a profession, don't always get.

I've been involved in the organization since the early 1980s, and was elected president for the Philadelphia region early on and then organization president in 2003. It was through the network I created for myself that I learned how to develop business, which is a critical element to advancement in any legal career.

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

A: I have been practicing law for more than 30 years, and while things have progressed for women, there are still a few ingrained behaviors and attitudes at a senior level of the profession that have been slow to change. Today, and this is a generalization, an older generation of men run most large firms and they tend to retain these behaviors and attitudes, many of which they might not even be aware. In

order to change this behavior, women need to enlighten senior leadership as to the challenges women face in both the partnership and nonpartnership ranks. It is truly a case of trying to change culture so that women do not feel that they are always swimming upstream against attitudes that may hinder their careers.

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

A: Fortunately I cannot think of a time when I encountered overt sexism at my firm. In fact, earlier in my career it was the opposite — the men felt they needed to have a woman at meetings so I may have been included more than my male counterparts at times.

Even though I haven't encountered sexism personally, I have heard from many female attorneys stories about it and recognize that it still exists in the legal profession. In particular, I think the topic of women and maternity leave is a major area where sexism is prevalent. Across the industry I think there is a perception that maternity leave is a "vacation" and women are slacking off when they take leave. This view can certainly hold women back in their career. The issue needs to be addressed by changing perceptions so that maternity leave is viewed the same as other medical conditions that require an employee to take time off.

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

A: I have three tips for aspiring female attorneys:

1. You can never expect to become an equal partner in a law firm without having an equal partner at home. In a two-career couple, if the woman has to be in charge of more than 50 percent of the work at home, it makes it very difficult for a woman to achieve parity in the work place.
2. Don't let what other people think about you drive your behavior. Develop a strong sense of what you think is right for you, your career, and your place in the firm rather than conforming to what might be perceived by others as traditional behaviors.
3. Look for professional sponsors. Identify the person you think can help advance your career and then develop a professional relationship with that person so that eventually you can ask him or her to advocate for and sponsor you moving forward. This is a huge advantage. Men tend to develop these sponsor relationships much better than women. Many women think that if they come to work and do a great job, they will be promoted. Unfortunately, that is not how it works. You need to have someone who will sponsor and advocate for you and be invested in your career. So identifying that person and developing that relationship early is important.

I did not have a sponsor when I was an associate, but I have seen how it has helped others, which is why I have been a sponsor and advocate for other women lawyers in our firm. If I had understood this concept when I first started practicing, my career may have progressed differently. Our industry is an old boys' network, but it also encompasses who you know, who has the power, who is going to advocate for you, and who is going to push you to succeed.

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

A: Law firms need to make sure that women believe they have an equal opportunity to advance within a

partnership. We don't need women's initiatives or special awards to show how welcoming the industry is to women. What we do need, however, is an equal playing field both with respect to opportunity and as to how our skills are evaluated. Firms also shouldn't prefer men to women in leadership positions or in any other way.

It would also help if firms were able to create an environment that was more conducive to that elusive "work/life balance." This would be beneficial to both men and women and help in achieving gender neutrality. Technology has made it easier to work outside of the office, allowing men and women to accommodate both personal and professional demands. Of course, there will always be times when one side of the balance is more demanding than the other but this shouldn't be a gender issue. By fostering a culture where men and women both feel able to take time for their families or personal life, the current negative perception of women in the workplace not being fully committed to their careers because of family obligations would disappear.

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

A: I recently read Justice Sonia Sotomayor's inspiring book that shared the many challenges she faced in her life and career. I related to many parts of her story as I found we have some similarities. For example, we are the same age and we went to law school and started to practice law at the same time. Many of the stories she told struck a very familiar chord with me.

She has overcome many more challenges than I have had to in my life, but that is part of what I admire about her. She overcame the adversity of growing up as a relatively poor minority girl living in the Bronx to become one of the most powerful women in the American judicial system.

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