Women Attys Reveal How To Rebound From A BigLaw Break

By Katherine Laskowski

Law360, New York (March 31, 2015, 6:12 PM ET) -- Relaunching a full-time legal career can be tough for women who have taken time off for family or personal reasons, but fellows in a program that has placed these "returners" at a number of BigLaw firms recommend steps they can take to come out swinging after a hiatus — and some things firms can do to help them.

Women re-entering BigLaw face a number of challenges: learning new technologies, adapting to changes in the legal landscape and taking direction from senior associates sometimes young enough to be their children.

As a result, law firms are losing out: While 50 percent of law school graduates are female, women make up just 15 percent of equity partners at BigLaw firms and just 7 percent of firmwide managing partners.

This is why Caren Ulrich Stacy created the OnRamp Fellowship program, which offers "returnships" for women lawyers looking to get back in the game. The program launched in 2014 with backing from Baker Botts LLP, Cooley LLP, Hogan Lovells and Sidley Austin LLP, and has grown rapidly: On Monday, Covington & Burling LLP, Goodwin Procter LLP, Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman LLP and Fox Rothschild LLP announced they would begin offering fellowships.

After 14 years away from full-time law, Dora M. de la Rosa landed at Sidley's Los Angeles office in May thanks to OnRamp.

"I thought about it for a couple of years before I actually did and just wasn't sure how to go about it," she said. "I think you tend to have some self-doubt and some lack of self-confidence because you haven't been in it for a while."

The Challenges

Pamela Zdunek, whom the OnRamp program placed at Sidley's Chicago office, says technology has been a challenge for many of the fellows, including her.

Before she took time off, Zdunek had a robust career in corporate law, with stints at McDermott Will & Emery LLP as well as at a Chicago boutique firm and in the law department of financial services company CIT Group Inc. But of the nine fellows tapped for the program's first year, Zdunek says she is the one who's been out of the full-time loop the longest, having returned after a 21-year hiatus.
"I was probably the only one who left practice when lawyers were not using computers. ... It was a whole new world to me," she said.

Zdunek says she had to learn how to process her own documents, use programs such as iManage, conduct virtual closings, work with PDFs, and negotiate the politics of whom to copy on emails and whom not to.

Zdunek says she didn't even realize that digital storage of files had become the norm. "I thought there was a file room," she said, laughing.

And the business of law has changed, too. Mary J. Klumpp, an OnRamp fellow who practices trademark law, says that when she started with Cooley, she found it hard to adjust to a world where the pockets aren't as deep and clients are more budget-conscious.

Klumpp left Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP's Washington, D.C., office — right across the street from her current office at Cooley, as it happens — in 2002, which she said was the end of the era when clients would accept hourly billing without question.

This climate has also impacted staffing, according to de la Rosa, who now sees secretaries working with five to six attorneys. This means attorneys are often doing work themselves that they might have given to a secretary in the past, she says.

It can be also be tough to fit into a firm culture as a first-year associate with more life experience than most other first-years, the fellows say.

A person who might be a peer at the dinner table or at kids' soccer practices could also be the one handing out assignments, Klumpp says, and it's important to realize this might be uncomfortable for both parties.

It can be hard, too, for firms to figure out what to do with returners, who don't fit the typical profile of the first-year associate coming straight out of law school or the lateral hire later in her career, Klumpp said.

"It's the same as someone coming in as a lateral, but it's completely different at the same time," she said.

**The Path Back to BigLaw**

The fellows say Stacy set them up with a number of resources to smooth the transition: career coaches, continuing legal education materials from the Practising Law Institute, and seminars on topics like technological changes and social media marketing.

This helped set their potential employers at ease, according to Peter Willsey, chair of the trademark, copyright and advertising practice group where Klumpp works at Cooley.

"OnRamp makes it a bit easier because you know, OK, somebody's screening these people and counseling them and coaching them, so if we interview somebody from OnRamp, they're probably going to be good," he said.
The program also organized monthly calls during which fellows could swap stories and pointers, as well as periodic calls on themes like interviewing, negotiating and finding a mentor. The fellows say being able to reach out to other women in the same circumstances was crucial.

"Find someone who's going through it, because it's important to share experiences and commiserate a little bit," de la Rosa recommended.

Zdunek says returners should make sure the timing is right for them and have a clear picture of what a firm's expectations of them will be.

"You and your family need to know what you're in for, as far as the hours," Zdunek said. "I had no delusions about what it was going to be. I think ... my kids were shocked at some of the hours. But I'd practiced in BigLaw before, so I knew."

She says those thinking about returning should assess the skills they have and update the ones that need it. But not all of those skills have to come from a decades-old legal resume: Women attorneys often gain useful experience during their hiatus that they can mine as they return.

Klumpp, for instance, was involved in military spouse advocacy during her years away from BigLaw, and this helped her transition back into legal work.

Meanwhile, de la Rosa, who works on commercial real estate transactions, returned with years of real estate experience from her prehiatus career — on the litigation side. However, the eight years she had spent on the local school board during her break gave her some familiarity with deals, as the school board was the largest landowner in the community, she says.

**A Helping Hand From the Firm**

Willsey says that one of the challenges of working with returners is that legal issues might not be as fresh for them as for a first-year associate.

"The positive is they come in with maturity and good judgment and good people skills," he said. "The negative is it's been some time since they've actually dealt with a substantive issue like a likelihood of confusion objection from the trademark office. So you're retraining someone and relearning."

Willsey says the firm gave Klumpp the same type of training it would give any junior associate, reviewing draft emails and documents and going over with her any changes he made to them.

This approach of treating returners the same as other first-year associates helps them get back up to speed, the fellows say.

Like de la Rosa, Zdunek had to switch gears upon her return. In Sidley's global finance group, she works in banking and securitizations, and she says she's had to learn a lot, since she didn't work much with banks before and securitization wasn't as prevalent when she originally left BigLaw.

She suggests that in a situation like this, the firm could make sure to invite returners to seminars on topics junior associates will typically be dealing with, such as due diligence, or on practice area-specific issues like the Uniform Commercial Code, which Zdunek says has been rewritten in the time since she left full-time practice.
Klumpp recommends that firms might also want to consider what the military calls an "after-action meeting," in which participants review what they've learned from a case and what they might approach differently next time.

But most important for firms is an open attitude and a willingness to offer guidance to returners, the fellows say. Returning women shouldn't be afraid to ask questions or seek help from their colleagues at the firm.

"There's just going to be things that you're not going to know, since you haven't been around," Klumpp said. "In the 12 years I was away, I wasn't learning trademark law by osmosis."

De la Rosa said that the collegial attitude she found among the real estate group at Sidley made her transition much easier.

Zdunek, also at Sidley, says it helps that awareness of the OnRamp program is fairly high within the firm, which has been home to four of the inaugural group of nine fellows. The firm arranges quarterly check-in calls for the fellows with members of the firm's committee on retention and promotion of women and the firm's diversity director, according to Zdunek.

"It’s just helpful if the people you’re working with understand the program, understand that we’re coming back after a long hiatus and, in some cases, switching practice groups," she said.

And it’s not just the fellows who win out. Willsey says OnRamp benefits firms by providing them vetted candidates who bring to the table not just legal experience, but also life experience. Before working with the program, he says, he didn't see many candidates with this type of background.

"I think it’s a good deal for law firms. And I think it's a good deal for the participants in the program," he said.

--Additional reporting by Gavin Broady. Editing by Katherine Rautenberg and Mark Lebetkin.

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