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Getting to 50/50: Retaining women in corporate law goes well beyond high salaries

Despite the progress made towards achieving gender equality and diversity in the major South African law firms in recent years, it is undeniable that the retention of women in corporate law continues to pose significant challenges. Getting this right is a competitive differentiator – those who do will have access to a far greater pool of talent and will reap the long-term rewards of the investment that they have made in their women. Diverse teams also make more robust and creative business decisions, which contribute to better business results both for the firm and for clients.

Achieving real and measurable change requires a deliberate plan – proactively driven and supported at the most senior levels – which is aimed at setting women up for success and creating an inclusive and gender-equitable environment.

Leading gender equity from the front is a top priority for us. For instance, we were the first major South African law firm to appoint a woman to a senior leadership role in 2015, the first to adopt a formal gender strategy, the first to adopt parental transitional coaching, the first to join the 30% Club, and the first to sign up to the United Nations' Women's Empowerment Principles. Change is contagious, and we have been delighted to see similar shifts in other

South African law firms, including in their senior leadership teams, many of which now also include women.

Currently, 47% of all our partners are women (a significant increase from November 2015; when we first adopted our formal gender strategy and women made up only 35% of our total partner body). In addition, 54% of our legal services team and more than 59% of our total firm are now women, and women make up 44% of our senior leadership team (Board and Excom). We are very conscious of the importance of role modelling, and actively consider diversity in all leadership appointments, including our practice leaders, business unit heads and sector leaders. It is also important to give young leaders the space to learn leadership skills in multiple roles over their careers.

Women face some unique challenges in rising to the top in corporate law firms, and our strategy is organised across multiple pillars aimed at addressing these, such as building a more flexible work environment, access to quality clients and work, and business development and profile building, ensuring our policies and procedures support our strategy, employee engagement and culture, and eliminating gender stereotyping and unconscious bias. We also seek to make a broader impact through our CSI and pro bono efforts. Our Gender Strategy Working Group (GSWG), which includes senior male and

female partners and is a subcommittee of the Board, oversees our gender strategy and sets fresh concrete initiatives and targets each year that are intended to achieve our overall strategy.

BUILDING A MORE FLEXIBLE WORK ENVIRONMENT

One of the most common reasons that women leave corporate law is for a better work/life balance. Transactional work is fast paced with long hours and urgent deadlines, and many women are tempted by in-house counsel roles that promise more predictable hours.

In response, we have worked very hard to create a more accommodating and flexible working environment. Teamwork and collaboration are key to managing workload, and there are significant benefits to working in a large firm with deep bench strength and multi-disciplinary expertise. Often, women who move into small in-house legal teams tell me that they actually find that environment more stressful because they have to do everything and are restricted in their ability to brief external counsel in the face of increasing cuts on legal spend.

A difficult transition period often occurs when women return to these demands after taking maternity leave. It can feel overwhelming until one finds a rhythm and a new way of working, and often women feel conflicted and leave practice at this point. Our parental coaching

programme (which is aimed at all new parents – men and women) is designed to help equip our people (and their line managers) with the skills to adapt to this. We also expect and encourage our men to be active and involved parents, and we encourage role modelling that helps address the historical societal imbalance in caregiving responsibilities, and challenges stereotypes.

Giving our people the space to manage their professional and personal commitments is also key. Long before COVID, we adopted a flexible working policy that allows remote and/or flexi-time arrangements. We also have a myriad of part-time working options, and most of our lawyers currently work remotely two days a week.

We have also recently adopted an Of Counsel role as an alternative career path for lawyers who may not want to continue with or into full partner or equity partner roles. This is a critical tool to provide a flexible career path and prevent an exit from practice, but with the possibility of re-entry into partnership at any point.

ACCESS TO QUALITY CLIENTS AND WORK, AND BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT AND PROFILE BUILDING

Every year, we undertake a pay analysis at various levels to confirm that the firm pays consistently and fairly for performance. However, success as a corporate lawyer – and financial reward – depends to a great extent on one's ability to generate revenue. This, in turn, relies upon access to quality clients and work.

Accordingly, we proactively seek to ensure that all our people get the exposure they need to showcase their talents. We proactively

encourage diversity in all client pitches, thought leadership opportunities, conference speakers and attendance, submissions to ranking agencies, and access to secondments with clients and our relationship firms, including global secondments with Linklaters.

We also invest in networks like the 30% Club, which provides extensive opportunities for women to share learnings and build their professional relationships.

POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

We regularly review our firm's policies to eliminate any biases, and actively make changes to build a more inclusive and gender equitable working environment. We recently adopted a new Harassment Policy, which is intended to foster a culture of mutual respect and a "start by believing" approach to reports of harassment. Other policies aimed at addressing issues related to gender equity include our Gender Inclusion Policy and our Domestic and Gender-Based Violence Policy. Our Gender Inclusion Policy provides guidance on the use of non-sexist, gender-inclusive and gender-neutral language, and to communicate the support that the firm will provide to anyone who undergoes a process of gender transitioning. We have also finished converting some of our bathrooms to gender-neutral spaces that can be used by any person, regardless of gender identity or expression. Although the demographic directly affected by this initiative is probably quite small, it is a symbol of our commitment to inclusivity and has been well received by all. Our Domestic and Gender-Based Violence Policy aims to ensure that our people feel confident about initiating open and supportive discussions if they are, or have been, affected by violence, or

if they suspect that someone else has. It also provides access to specific support (such as emergency accommodation, special leave and security) for survivors.

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT AND CULTURE

We frequently assess the effectiveness of our initiatives through employee feedback, surveys and other data, to make ongoing improvements and adaptations to adopt an inclusive culture. We also developed a Webber Wentzel Wellness Programme which focuses holistically on our people's physical, financial, emotional and social well-being, and provides access to a range of onsite services and information. This also encourages a more compassionate and supportive environment.

ELIMINATING GENDER STEREOTYPING AND UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

We conduct unconscious bias awareness sessions and recently published our Gender Inclusive Language Guidelines, which are aimed at avoiding or reducing the use of gender-specific terms while drafting.

We also regularly showcase the stories and successes of senior women across all sectors to all our staff (men and women) through the Webber Wentzel Women's Internal Network. By amplifying these stories, we aim to dispel gender stereotypes by changing views on what leadership looks like.

Although we are very nearly at our target of achieving a 50/50 gender split across our full partnership by 2025, our efforts cannot stop. Until the playing field is level, we will need to continue to take active steps in multiple areas to advance and retain women in our senior ranks. 