

Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Foley's Jill Nicholson

Jill Nicholson is a partner in [Foley & Lardner LLP's Chicago](#) office, where she is national chairwoman of the firm's bankruptcy and business reorganizations practice, spanning 50 attorneys in 10 cities. She sets the strategic vision for Foley's bankruptcy group and related initiatives. She has been selected as one of the top 100 restructuring professionals in the world by Global M&A Network, one of 12 Outstanding Young Restructuring Lawyers under the age of 40 by Turnaround and Workouts magazine, a leading lawyer in corporate restructuring by The Legal 500, and an Illinois Super Lawyer.



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Nicholson also serves as an adjunct professor of law at Washington University in St. Louis, where she teaches a course on advanced commercial bankruptcy and corporate restructuring and is board-certified as a business bankruptcy specialist by the American Board of Certification.

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

A: My answer is simple. I was told from an early age that I could do whatever I wanted or be whatever I wanted to be. I carried that message with me, believing that if you love what you do, you will be good at it and will succeed despite what others may think. I am convinced that a person's passion will always shine through — colleagues will recognize it, clients will appreciate it, and critics will eventually fall to the wayside.

Also, accepting "that's the way it has always been done" is not an option. I found that asking the tough questions has served me well. However, more important than just asking those questions is proposing a solution. I liken it to an associate who may have stumbled over an issue. It's one thing if the associate merely informs you of a mistake; it is an entirely different story if the associate has carefully assessed the situation and proactively proposed a solution. Breaking into any network requires having a vision, a clear strategy, and being a problem solver. I found that by identifying the problem, proposing a solution, and fixing it, a person can move mountains.

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

A: With seniority comes additional responsibility, including balancing competing interests on

your time. You have to be more than an excellent lawyer, you have to be a trusted adviser to your clients. You also may be entrusted with additional administrative responsibilities if you assume a leadership role. The bottom line is that where you once had three spinning plates, you may now have nine or 10. Prioritizing is essential. Know who you are and stay focused on your key goals. As much as we like to think we can and should do everything, successful senior-level women look beyond themselves and build a larger team dedicated to achieving those goals.

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

A: As a young associate, I needed to consult with a supervising partner on a case. As I walked into the partner's office, he was meeting with a staff member. The staff member turned to me and informed me that I should bring her a pen and a pad of paper, assuming I was the partner's assistant. I had two options at that point: Correct her in front of the partner and potentially embarrass her as to her stereotype, or retrieve what she needed. Without saying a word, I quietly retrieved the pen and the paper.

The lesson here is that we all need a hand and whether I was an assistant, an attorney or a CEO, my view was that there was something she needed and I could do her a favor. She eventually learned that I was not an assistant and later approached me to apologize. She stated that she was grateful that I had handled the situation the way I did. That singular act of kindness on my part won me a friend for life.

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

A: Find a person who will be your champion and make yourself indispensable to that person. Your champion will be someone who will go to bat for you when you need it and is willing to use his or her own political capital to advance your career.

Young attorneys, male or female, also often make a key mistake. That is, they fail to make themselves truly indispensable to a supervisor or to a client. They forsake forging deep bonds with a handful of select folks who will ultimately help to advance their careers for the sake of doing bits and pieces on a variety of different matters. That does not mean that an aspiring female attorney shouldn't get a breadth of experience and work with a variety of

people. It simply means she should also take the time to do due diligence and seek out work from those folks who will be as dedicated to her as she is to them.

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

A: Address retention early and often. Identify those women early on who are superstars and don't let them slip through the cracks. Remind them that they are a valued part of the team. As a corollary, firm leadership must take an active role in working with women attorneys in identifying niche areas and developing and promoting their talent. Finally, while we expect folks to give 110 percent, remember the value of a kind word or a simple thank you. Acknowledging that person's commitment and contribution can yield years of loyalty in return. In short, when she asks herself why she would want to be a partner at [ABC](#) law firm, you should have already furnished her with a reason long before she ever has to make that decision.

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

A: One person immediately comes to mind. My very first mentor in law firm practice — Joan Kubalanza of [Lewis Brisbois](#). Joan was an active mentor. I never had to knock on her door. Advice came unsolicited. She was candid and honest, and she helped me to navigate my way in those early years. She was also kind and always had my best interests at heart. When she left to sit on the bench, she applied that same concern and compassion she had as my mentor to the cases she handled.