

For Women, Leaving Big Law for a Midsize Firm Doesn't Mean Settling

"Midsize firms aren't a consolation prize for lawyers who eschew Big Law," Hanson Bridgett managing partner-elect Kristina Lawson writes. "For me and for so many others, they're the reward."

By Kristina Lawson
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Editor's note: This is a response to a recent Careerist column, "Am Law 100 Firms That Are Failing Women."

My recruiter was mystified. He had scheduled interviews with several Big Law firms vying for my attention. Their partners raved about their firms' vast resources. They promised lavish compensation and proclaimed their eagerness to support my land use and environmental law practice. So why wasn't I thrilled?



Kristina Lawson

The more I considered these options, the less appealing they became. I'd spent years at a large firm, and I knew that ambition and drive wasn't always prized or rewarded in meaningful ways. I wanted a seat at the table at a firm that

was deeply rooted in the community. I was eager to help set and steer direction—and be part of a firm where other women and people of color were leaders, too. Despite their partners' assurances, Big Law firms weren't doing this. But more modest midsize practices were. I joined Hanson Bridgett three years ago and have never regretted it.



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In urging me to join a Big Law firm, my recruiter made the same mistake columnist Vivia Chen did in her June 25 column "Am Law 100 Firms That Are Failing Women," in which she excoriates firms for their "truly embarrassingly low female equity partner rates." They both assumed that women who opted for "largely regional firms or firms with low-profit margin practices" are somehow settling for less than they deserve. These are "perfectly good law firms," Chen asserts, but she finds it "deflating" that these "humdrum places" are women's best options.

Take a Lesson

Women are indeed thriving at smaller, midsize firms, but these practices are hardly humdrum. In

fact, Big Law would be wise to take a lesson from smaller, nimbler and more inclusive practices that welcome women and encourage them to take leadership and management roles.

At Hanson Bridgett, 46% of our 177 lawyers are women. Women comprise 41% of our equity partnership. No wonder our firm ranked third this year on the NLJ 500 Women in Law Scorecard. Compare us to DLA Piper, which Chen called out for its 14.5% female equity partner rate. “How is it possible that of the 422 equity partners at DLA, only 61 women qualify for equity?” she asked. “Are the other 361 men truly far superior?”

It’s no secret that Big Law firms specialize in sealing hefty deals and litigating high-profile cases. They bill top dollar and pay their lawyers handsomely. But success and prestige can come at a steep price. Opaque management decisions can throttle the ambitions of lawyers who don’t fit a rigid mold. There’s often little transparency about recruitment strategies and decisions. A competitive culture devalues attorneys who serve their clients with the greatest efficiency or excel at collaboration, while rewarding those who rake in the most revenue and bill the most hours. When our industry uses only these rigid metrics to evaluate firms, it’s no wonder that so many are failing not just women but, really, all lawyers.

An Intentional Choice

As I considered my lateral move, I looked for a workplace that opened the doors of opportunity to any lawyer who wanted to lead and grow. Hanson Bridgett encouraged my ambition and valued my

personal and professional interests. About a year after joining, I was named the leader of the firm’s real estate and environment section. In January 2021, I will become managing partner. Other midsize firms have also been welcoming to women as managing partners, a sign of respect for their leadership and authority. For instance, earlier this month Houston-based Susman Godfrey, which has about 160 lawyers, named its first female managing partner.

It’s time to end the widespread but mistaken assumption that Big Law should be the gold standard for a law practice and that size, profits and a global office footprint are the sole metrics for evaluating success. The firms Chen disparages as “humdrum places where women are doing well” are actually the winners. These law practices have cracked the code on creating an inclusive, thriving workplace where women can not only envision themselves in a leadership or equity partner role but also see so many others already there, welcoming them.

Midsize firms aren’t a consolation prize for lawyers who eschew Big Law. For me and for so many others, they’re the reward.

***Kristina Lawson** is Hanson Bridgett’s managing partner-elect. She specializes in complex entitlement, land use, environmental, and municipal matters, and frequently advises clients on public policy and government-relations strategy. She served on the city council and as mayor of the city of Walnut Creek, California, from 2010 to 2014.*