



Sheppard Mullin Chases The Cool Quotient in D.C.

Listening to associates' ideas is seen as good way to keep them for the long haul.

BY KATELYN POLANTZ

Ten stories above Sheppard, Mullin, Richter & Hampton's staid Washington office reception room, the firm's associates brainstorm about their work, life and happiness.

Associates in the office like Fatema Merchant, Matthew Riemer and Cheryl Palmeri have pushed for an inclusive culture where young people want to work and hope to stay. Their sense of empowerment contrasts with the stereotypes of Big Law, where hours are long, competition for talent is fierce and lateral move negotiations are common.

Palmeri spearheads a work-life balance group her D.C. colleagues started this summer and meets a few times a month. They would like to expand and formalize the firm's largely case-by-case approach to alternative work schedules. Their goal is to retain young talent, especially female lawyers, who often struggle to pursue partner-track and leadership roles at the same pace as men.

One of Palmeri's ideas: Loosen the minimum billable hour requirements as women prepare for and return from maternity leave. The minimum for associates is 1,950 hours per year, she said. "Some of my colleagues are female associates, and they're my favorite



DIEGO M. RADZINSKI

CHILLING: Fatema Merchant, J. Aaron George and Mark Jensen, from left, chat in Sheppard Mullin's cafeteria. They and other young associates have pushed to create an inclusive atmosphere.

people to work with. I don't want to lose them."

So far, Sheppard Mullin's associate-driven programs have built a reputation. Merchant, an associate who joined Sheppard Mullin after working at another law firm, organized a gathering at the restaurant Zaytinya in July to celebrate with colleagues the breaking of that day's Ramadan fast. A member of the diversity committee, Merchant planted the idea with a more senior partner and the firm

paid for the event, called an iftar.

Another associate, Matthew Riemer, a second-year, planned and hosted with the firm's backing a party in June to mark LGBT Pride week. "It's one thing to acknowledge this is a diverse and inclusive environment," he said. "It's another thing to see it."

Before Sheppard Mullin moved this month into a renovated space on three floors of 2099 Pennsylvania Ave N.W.—formerly Holland & Knight's haunt—the firm

included associates on décor choices such as the position of their desks and which carpet swatches could work, Merchant said.

Now moved in, Merchant keeps colorful wall hangings, a beanbag chair and a paper-clip holder shaped like a bathroom sink on her desk, next to the business cards.

"If your lawyers are happier, they're going to do better work. They're going to be more productive," said Deborah Epstein Henry, founder of Flex-Time Lawyers, a consulting group. She advocates for affinity groups similar to Sheppard Mullin's associate-involved committees and flexible work schedules.

"Lifestyle points," as Henry calls them, can help set a firm apart, especially when young lawyers say money is less their priority than quality of life at work.

This isn't to trivialize the business. Sheppard Mullin is an AmLaw 100 firm with \$1.2 million profits per partner in 2013. The firm has grown to 60 lawyers in D.C. since it opened here in 2003 with about 20. Its team of Washington rainmakers covers government contracts, trade, antitrust and white-collar work; senior attorneys lateraled from firms including Fried, Frank, Harris, Shriver & Jacobson; Schnader Harrison Segal & Lewis; Shook, Hardy & Bacon; and Mayer Brown. Northrop Grumman Corp., for instance, is a major client. Sheppard Mullin's West Coast roots and govern-by-consensus partnership style have contributed to the office's feel.

WORK-LIFE BALANCE

During the past few years, law firms have become more comfortable having conversations about work-life balance, Henry



DEBORAH EPSTEIN HENRY: "If your lawyers are happier, they're going to do better work."

said. They use the idea in marketing strategies and, as Sheppard Mullin's D.C. leaders do, strive for a cool quotient.

Yet stigma still attaches to attorneys who aren't driven by ambition. Associate-driven ideas can lack weight unless they attract support from top leaders. And lawyers don't always take advantage of quality-of-life opportunities.

For instance, in a Working Mother and Flex-Time Lawyers ranking of the 50 best law firms for women, one-fifth of lawyers at those firms took advantage of policies that allow remote work plans—a norm in many modern companies, especially those in technology.

Cultural practices, too, can vary from city to city. Washington law offices are leaders in placing child-care facilities on site, Henry said; Arnold & Porter, for instance, opened a children's center in 1995, and Covington & Burling about a decade ago. Citywide, law offices in Washington have more part-time lawyers proportionally than their counterparts nationally.

Almost 8 percent of Washington lawyers work part time, according to a 2012 survey from the National Association for Law Placement. By comparison, 4.5 percent of New York City's lawyers work part time, while Baltimore, Seattle and San Francisco lead in this category at more than 12 percent each.

Among D.C.'s largest firms, Crowell & Moring; Hogan Lovells; Latham & Watkins; and Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr made the Working Mother list in 2014 by accommodating working women and lawyers seeking flexible work patterns. (Sheppard Mullin wasn't on the 2014 list. Jennifer Owens, the survey's editorial director, declined to discuss firms that didn't win the honor.)

Sheppard Mullin's D.C. work-life group hasn't yet formalized a plan or approached senior management about what the lawyers would like to implement.

In one way, they've already faced a telling setback. The female D.C. associate who pitched the idea for the work-life group left the law firm last month to travel the world with her husband.

"It doesn't derail our efforts," said Paul Werner, a partner involved in the affinity group. "It's an example of why we need to continue to focus on this. The key here is to get them to want to come back."

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