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[Back to Article](#)

Back Door to the Top

Vivia Chen
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Big law firms in big cities usually grab all the attention for their women lawyer initiatives. But if you look past the splashy all-women retreats and the glossy brochures, big firms generally aren't doing so well in elevating women to the partnership ranks. The surprise is that medium-size firms, including those located in the second cities of America, have done a better job.

Of the nearly 180 firms of [The Am Law 200](#) that submitted data on women and diversity this year to our **Women in Law Firms study**, almost 60 percent of the Am Law Second Hundred firms reported at least 19 percent women partners. That statistic is notable, because on average, women make up just 18 percent of all partners at Am Law 200 firms, according to our research. In contrast, only 41 percent of the Am Law First Hundred firms achieved that rate. (For all 210 firms included in the Women in Law Firms study, including some non-Am Law 200 firms, the average percentage of female partners at the firms was 19 percent.)

The gap between the Second Hundred and First Hundred firms is significant-but the story doesn't stop there. While female partners are more prevalent at Second Hundred firms, those women still aren't necessarily reaching the most coveted prize of law firm practice: equity partnership. Among the 20 firms reporting the highest proportion of women partners, the percentage of equity partners who are women varies drastically-from a high of 27.3 percent for Ice Miller to a low of 8.6 percent for Carlton Fields. (On average, firms have 16 percent female equity partners nationwide, according to the National Association of Women Lawyers.)

To get a sense of why some firms are more successful at fostering women to attain the top prize, we talked to the three Am Law 200 firms with the highest percentage of women equity partners: **Boston's Goulston & Storrs (22.5 percent)**; Indianapolis's Ice Miller (27.3 percent); and Los Angeles's Manatt, Phelps & Phillips (22.8 percent).

What do these three very different firms have in common? All three are relatively small and not highly leveraged: Goulston has 97 partners (all equity) out of 173 lawyers; Ice Miller has 117 partners (110 equity) out of 258; and Manatt has 188 partners (57 equity) out of 360. (For the Women in Law Firms study, firms were surveyed on head counts as of September 30, 2008. Manatt has laid off 17 lawyers since then.) All three firms have practices that tend to be non-Wall Streetish. Goulston and Manatt both have big real estate practices (Manatt is also well-known for its litigation and entertainment practices). Ice Miller's specialties include employment and labor law, litigation, public finance, and real estate.

Then there is the ineffable thing called "culture"-which at all three firms includes some history of left-of-center politics. As early as the 1920s, Goulston embraced civil liberties causes, including representing anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti in their unsuccessful appeal to overturn their death sentences. Susan Hollander, who joined Manatt as a lateral partner in 2000, says of her firm: "It's progressive politically." She cites founder Charles Manatt, a stalwart of the Democratic party. Ice Miller's managing partner Byron Myers notes that his firm's founders were active in the American Civil Liberties Union of Indiana: "Even when I got here [in 1977], it was not a pinstriped type of place." Still, the firms' openness to women wasn't only a matter of political affiliation. Ice Miller partner Myra Selby recalls finding support among Republican male partners when she was a young associate in the 1980s.

Even so, women didn't make partner at these firms until the women's movement was well underway. Ice Miller had its first female partner in 1979; and both Goulston and Manatt waited until the early 1980s to make their first women partners. Since then, though, women have risen to the top of firm management at both Manatt and Ice Miller, which have elected women managing partners: Maria Hummer at Manatt in the early 1980s and Melissa Profitt Reese at Ice Miller from 2004 to 2007.

At Goulston, partner Marilyn Sticklor also set an early example that equity partners can work part-time. Pregnant with her second child in 1982 when she made partner, Sticklor went on to have two more children while working four days a week, a schedule she kept for 14 years. Four other women at the firm became equity partners in the 1980s while also working on a part-time or flextime schedule, she says.

At both Ice Miller and Goulston, women also seem to have benefited by the fact that the firms look beyond billable hours or client generation in elevating associates to partners. Former managing partner Reese says that Ice Miller looks at "the complete person," rather than "certain number of billable hours." And current managing partner Myers says that, "any attempt to rank our partners according to their rainmaking ability or accomplishments would be contrary to our culture."

Goulston's managing partner Husid believes that women may have greater success in firms where profits are not the end-all and be-all. "Am Law 100 firms are more driven by profits per partner than performance as a whole, so that creates a narrow funnel to

partnership," says Husid. "There just isn't one path to partnership here. We hope and expect associates will be partners." The result, he adds, is that more women stay in the pipeline to partnership.

Compared with the other two firms, Manatt is more openly bottom line-oriented, with much higher profits per partner (\$926,000) than either Goulston (\$618,000) or Ice Miller (\$526,000). "We follow the money," says Manatt partner Ellen Marshall, who's also on the firm's board of directors, which is similar to an executive committee. "There's definite value accorded to client generation." Yet not only do women comprise almost 23 percent of Manatt's equity partners, some are big business-getters. "Women are top rainmakers and head up practice groups," says CEO and managing partner William Quicksilver. Among them he cites banking cochair Marshall, intellectual property cochair Susan Hollander, and advertising law chair Linda Goldstein.

Manatt's secret: It went out to the market and roped in women with big books of business. Unlike Goulston and Ice Miller where most of the women partners are homegrown, Manatt's ranks of female partners swelled through strategic recruiting. Some 11 out of Manatt's 13 women equity partners are laterals-most hired within the last ten years. "I'm not sure [Manatt] was targeting women," says lateral partner Susan Hori, the head of the firm's Orange County office. She adds, though, that the firm has been "very supportive" since she joined. "It's not a big male-dominated firm," says Hollander. "It's nonsexist in terms of support and marketing opportunities."

Not that these women needed much help. "I never had a mentor," says Marshall. "I figured out things myself-that's what you do as a lawyer." Likewise, Hollander attributes her success to her own "obsessiveness. . . . I am available to clients all the time." Will this crop of women equity partners inspire the next generation of Manatt women? That's not so clear. "I don't hold myself out as being emblematic of anything," says Marshall. The flip side of the firm's success in lateral hires is a much more modest record in promoting women lawyers to equity partnership.

For now, the takeaway is that there are multiple ways to boost the number of women partners. Progressive family-friendly policies help, but hiring a bunch of strong women rainmakers does the trick, too. In other words-get them any way you can.

Photo: Women partners at Indianapolis's Ice Miller by Wayne Cable

E-mail: vivia.chen@incisivemedia.com

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