

# Support network

Katherine A Helm and Sharon K Gagliardi discuss mentoring programmes supporting women in the law sector during the Covid-19 pandemic

**T**he Covid-19 pandemic has created unprecedented challenges for working professionals. We have all been inundated with reports and statistics on how the current Covid-19 environment is causing increased stress, anxiety, fatigue, and seemingly professional paralysis for many attorneys.

Private law firms and public companies rolled out a host of programmes and benefits in 2020, including increased access to mentoring, coaching, counselling, mental well being programmes, various support and affinity groups, alongside various remote working accommodations during these trying times.

While lawyers are hardly likely to garner as much sympathy as, say, frontline workers, female attorneys have been a focal point of concern in the legal industry and beyond. Every day we see articles reminding us that working women, and particularly women of colour, are far more likely to suffer and make tradeoffs in their legal careers for family and to experience lost income and missed career opportunities as a result. This is a problem that many mentorship programmes are actively seeking to address.

## Are the programmes working?

Now that we have entered 2021, we are beginning to consider which of these well intentioned initiatives are most useful or even working at all. In this article, we present a dual set of law firm perspectives on the importance of lasting mentorship programmes. We also provide some suggestions on how to maximise these efforts and improve our outcomes for mentors and mentees alike.

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First, the data. It is hard to look at the numbers when we are in the eye of the storm. Even as vaccines are being rolled out, many major legal hubs have been faced with new rounds of lockdown measures amidst a surge in Covid-19 cases and concerns over infectious new virus strains. The rollover from 2020 to 2021 did not bring with it instant relief. Thus, some of the ostensibly temporary initiatives are still going at full steam. These initiatives, along with remote mentoring programmes, include flexible work schedules, subsidised memberships to childcare and tutoring services and paid leave for parents working from home.

To be sure, a band aid solution is required when you need to stop the bleeding. But should all these benefits extend to post-pandemic life and be offered permanently, as some companies are touting with assurance

to their employees? Enter the ongoing debate of whether we want to continue *ad infinitum* to provide lawyers with an increased means to disconnect from their work environment, and by extension their professional mentoring relationships. Without even addressing the controversial aspect of having programmes that incentivise working women to outsource their parenting duties, there are no easy answers here.

In this article, we focus our analysis on mentorship programmes specifically. In our view, modern mentorship programmes are even more important to implement alongside some of the above initiatives, to address and hopefully attenuate the backsliding that is reportedly occurring of female attorneys' advancements in the workforce during the pandemic. For the purposes of this article, we take a broad view of mentors to encompass a category of experienced and trusted advisors who provide guidance and assistance to more junior colleagues and may include individuals in the roles of sponsors, advocates, allies, assisted networkers and similar other terms. Here are some of the key ways in which we believe modern mentorship programmes can help female attorneys in 2021 and beyond.

## We all need a sense of belonging

Many reports have documented that women are missing the companionship of in-person mentorship programmes during the pandemic. The less time women spend at the office, or working from their home office, the less connected they are to their coworkers and the more difficult it may be to develop potentially powerful mentoring relationships. A good

mentoring relationship needs time and effort to grow organically within a work community. A good mentor can be key to helping you stay motivated and to keep going through the hard times.

If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that we can all do more than we think we can. Sometimes we need to be reminded of this by people who believe in us. Sometimes we need those people to be outside of our family unit. A good mentor can be someone who reminds you of why you go to work in the first place, and how your clients and colleagues benefit from your advocacy skills as a 'legal ninja'.

If an "assigned" mentor is not fulfilling this role for you, step out of the box and seek a mentor who does. Leverage the use of videoconferencing platforms to reach out to someone senior to you, who may be more accessible and easier to "pin down" now than when they were constantly on the move with a booked calendar and pre-pandemic travel schedule.

### Focus on what you can do

We've all gotten in spots where we need some advice and perspective. Mentorship is about being that person who can provide that advice and help others by sharing our perspective and hard-earned wisdom. Sometimes it's as easy as reminding the person of something they already know: You've got this. Sometimes it's reassurance wrapped in experience: I've been there. It's hard. Keep going.

We all know the statistics that women don't volunteer for jobs unless they meet every one of the qualifications. How about the research showing that women are also more likely to be assigned to or volunteer for "non-promotable" tasks; time-consuming work that is unlikely to drive revenue. Female mentors know these studies can help female mentees remember that it is important to focus your valuable time on what matters now: prioritise your efforts and focus on what you can do at this moment, amidst the chaos, to get better and to advance in your career.

### Don't dwell on the past

It might seem like the natural approach is to ask your mentor to evaluate your work performance to date. There are two problems with this approach. First, that is not the job of a mentor; that's the job of a boss, a supervisor or someone who is responsible for directly reviewing your work. Secondly, research shows that in general, reflecting (or ruminating) on the past isn't the best way to figure out what we should be doing differently in the future.

In the legal world, we are often reminded that lawyers are only as good as their last case.

Instead of asking for inherently backward-looking feedback from someone who might not know the minutiae of your last great case or deal win (or loss), ask your mentor for advice going forward. That will encourage you both to stay focused on the path ahead and to give you concrete suggestions and actionable ideas to get you where you want to be.

### Put things in perspective

While it can be comforting to know you are not alone, sometimes mentors are most useful in providing invaluable perspective. Having the ability to step back and distill the essential points of action is one of the most important skills one can develop, especially when lawyers are often mired in work for clients.

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This is particularly true in these unprecedented times. Mentors can remind mentees to keep everything in context. This too shall pass; no one will remember your brief failures as well as you. A grey-haired mentor can remind a younger mentee of the adage that while you might think everyone is looking at you, in truth, everyone is too busy thinking about themselves to worry about what you are doing. So, worry less and act more. You're not going to feel competency if you haven't been doing something for a while. That's natural in a pandemic, when no one has been in a courtroom or traveled to a client or done myriad things that were second nature for lawyers a year ago.

Pivot is an overused word from 2020, but it still works. A mentor can help you become attuned to the legal skills that need to be refreshed versus those that need to be rejiggered for our current reality. A good mentor will reflect on what has worked, and perhaps even more importantly, what hasn't worked, and will pass along lessons learned when appropriate given the mentee's career path.

### Embrace the struggle

Let's be real. We are all still struggling and it's going to be a long time before we get back to any semblance of the old practice of law as it once was. There are innumerable new challenges and struggles and obstacles standing between us and our familiar stomping grounds and lawyers hate change. While the pandemic presents clear obstacles that we are all forced to confront with creative thinking, now is a great time to take stock of all obstacles (internal or external) that are hindering desired progress.

We need to embrace these struggles and grow from them. As the Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius told us, the impediment to action advances action and what stands in the way becomes the way. Author Ryan Holiday popularised this sentiment with his book 'The obstacle is the way', in which he reminds us to use an obstacle as both a tool and as fuel.

A good mentor can reassure a less-seasoned mentee that we all experience loneliness and listlessness at times. Technology is convenient, but it also leads to feelings of social isolation and strained efforts to make and maintain relationships with our clients and colleagues. Rather than let it impede us, we should use this strain to get stronger and drive us ahead. Just as we can increase physical strength by stressing a muscle to rebuild it, so too can we grow stronger from our mental stress and strain. Let a mentor remind you that it takes the same amount of work to make yourself miserable or to make yourself stronger. As you might tell your kids, turn that frown upside down. It works for adults too.

### Get out of your own head

While we need to acknowledge these difficult times, it is equally important not to succumb to negative thinking. Focusing on the tough times can create a self-fulfilling echo chamber of your own catastrophising. Yes, we are in a global pandemic and facing inordinately difficult work and home environments. But a good mentoring relationship can help minimise the noise and help create an environment where a mentee can speak without fear of retribution, feel heard, and move on.

Research shows that a "speak up" culture is integral to an inclusive culture and people who feel comfortable speaking their minds and being listened to will feel valued and thus more likely to make positive contributions to their work environment. As actor Michelle Williams eloquently said, "The next time a woman tells you what she needs to do her job, listen to her, believe her." A structured mentoring programme can make sure that everyone is given the space and ample opportunities to do just that. A mentor must engage in active

listening to create a space where mentees feel encouraged to speak because they know they will be heard. The goal, as Williams reminded us, is to allow working women to succeed because of their workplace environment, not in spite of it.

### Have a growth mindset

A good mentor believes in her mentee and believes that a mentoring relationship can foster a growth mindset. A growth mindset is one where skills and aptitudes can be developed through effort and dedicated practice rather than being fixed. A growth mindset is even more valuable in tough times. Think of Tom Brady, who just won his seventh Super Bowl championship and his fifth Superbowl MVP award at the near-geriatric age in professional football of 43. Earlier in 2020, commentators called him “Too old, Tom.” But Tom Brady had a good support system, a plan, and executed many of the above tips in this piece to barrel on ahead and execute at the highest level. As the *New York Times* summarised, “When he has something to prove, he is just about unbeatable.” There’s an aspirational goal for any lawyer at any stage of their career.

That said, we cannot each be the GOAT (Greatest of all time) at the practice of law. We need to ground ourselves in the quotidian reality of legal practice, which has neither a Super Bowl nor an off season. Also unlike football, it is important now, more than ever, to have a graceful, soft touch with our colleagues. A mentor can guide a mentee to sense the zeitgeist and embrace the new challenges posed by our remote working world in the face of shifting demands. Rather than staying in a fixed mindset of how things “should” work, mentors and mentees alike can support their female colleagues’ efforts to satisfy client demands with agility and dedicated effort.

### Knowledge is power

Knowledge of your clients is power. Many women attorneys are functioning as caregivers in their “spare” time, for their children, or their parents, or other loved ones. A kind and empathetic mentor can help a mentee translate these “home” skills to the work environment to be a caregiver to your clients. Women often excel at these soft skills and should employ them to keep in touch with their contacts and maintain their professional network, with an online business presence and with individualised attention over the videoconferencing platform du jour. Likewise, offer a “leave behind” – an article or written note or something of extra value that clients will read after the meeting is over.

Authenticity can be supremely effective; remove the veneer of an overly formal and

professional tone. Share your experiences in an honest way and relate to your colleagues and clients about the challenges of trying to maintain dual roles at work and at home. Reach out, ask clients how they are doing and how you can help. Many private practice attorneys will be amazed at how much client work they may be able to bring into their firm when the offer to help is genuine.

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### Tend to your relationships

A good mentoring relationship is beneficial to and nurtured by both the mentor and mentee; it is not a one-way street. Be mindful to check in with each other even when engulfed in work and especially during the pandemic when many are out of physical sight.

A good mentor is mindful that the time and effort dedicating to mentoring will benefit their clients, their firm, and the profession. If mentees feel included and heard, they will be willing to go the extra mile, helping not only their career, but enhancing value to clients and the firm. Numerous studies have shown that diverse companies, with diverse boards, are more successful than homogeneous or less diverse counterparts. Drilling down, some of the studies have documented that companies with a higher proportion of women in decision making roles correlates with revenue generation and increased benefits to shareholders. So too can mentorship programmes within a law firm or company help women advance, help companies retain and utilise top talent and maximise profits. These outcomes are real and show that the programmes are not purely altruistic.

Mentoring fosters feelings of integration that will increase work satisfaction, work performance, and improve retention.

Mentoring will also likely increase the mentor’s satisfaction with the ultimate work product of the mentee, through increased communication that can help align goals with outcomes for both individuals and teams. Having this dialogue and open line of communication can serve as a model for the rest of the law firm or company; it can provide a specific and intentional bridge between junior and senior employees to help everyone manage expectations and priorities. Mentoring is the right thing to do, not only for the betterment of the profession, but as a business model – it boosts productivity, profitability and ultimately the bottom line.

### Summary

In sum, mentorship programmes are integral to every aspect of both remote working environments during the current pandemic as well as to future reintegration efforts in a post-pandemic world. Mentoring relationships are part of the glue that holds our practice of client service together. These programmes will help get us through this and help guide us forward. There is no time like the present to reach out to your mentor/mentee and make someone feel wanted, needed, and valued.

### Authors



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