

The Metropolitan Corporate Counsel[®]

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Volume 15, No. 7

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July 2007

Pennsylvania/New Jersey – Law Firms

Epstein Becker & Green's Women's Initiative Continues To Grow

The Editor interviews Joan Disler and Maxine Neuhauser, Shareholders, Epstein Becker & Green PC.

Editor: Could you tell us about your background and professional experience?

Neuhauser: I was hired as a lateral associate in the Labor and Employment Practice when the firm opened its New Jersey office. I've been with the firm for 20 years, the last 15 as a shareholder. In my practice I represent management in a wide range of employment law matters including discrimination, wrongful discharge, whistleblower claims, wage and hour, restrictive covenants, the WARN Act and the Family Medical Leave Act. In addition to litigation, a large part of my practice is devoted to helping clients avoid being sued by providing advice and counsel, conducting training and drafting policies and handbooks. I am also a mediator.

Disler: I joined the firm as a partner in 2000 to establish the New Jersey office's ERISA/Benefits practice, as part of the firm's national ERISA practice. My practice area encompasses all of the specialty areas from retirement plans, plan drafting and corporate compliance to executive compensation and health and welfare plans.

Editor: What led you to create the Women's Initiative?

Neuhauser: The idea of the Women's Initiative emerged six years ago from conversations that Joan and I had with another of



**Joan
Disler**



**Maxine
Neuhauser**

our partners, Fran Maloney Green, about the difficulty we felt women with families had in finding time to network and build professional relationships outside the office. For so many of us, family and work were (and continue to be) our two overriding priorities. We have time left for little else. We felt it would be wonderful to create a program that would give women an opportunity to meet each other in an informal setting conducive to conversation and networking, as well as business and professional development.

Disler: At the same time I mentioned to Ron Green, the head of our Labor and Employment practice and one of the three founding members of the firm, that a friend of mine had invited me to a golf clinic for women sponsored by her consulting firm. Ron encouraged me to work on a similar program at EBG, and with that our Women's Initiative was born.

Editor: Do you believe that the firm is a good place for women to practice?

Neuhauser: Absolutely. The firm has a definite commitment to diversity. We have a diversity committee headed by a partner

and 55 percent of our attorneys are women. We have repeatedly heard from our women associates that the firm's reputation for being a good place for women was a factor in their decision to come here.

Disler: The firm strives to increase and maintain the number of female attorneys and is also very understanding of family commitment. In this regard, the firm has offered flex time arrangements for attorneys, which I took advantage of for a period of time. I no longer need the flex time arrangement, but I certainly am glad the firm supported it when the need was there.

Neuhauser: At the time I was hired, I was six months pregnant, so I joined after a six-month, pre-employment maternity leave. I also had a year of part-time employment after the birth of my second child, and a year after that I was elected shareholder.

Editor: Does the Women's Initiative have an outreach objective to attract clients?

Disler: In addition to enhancing the careers of its female employees, the purpose of the Women's Initiative is client development and business creation. The Women's Initiative is very focused on returns to the firm in that regard. The Women's Initiative has helped me to grow our benefits practice – I've met attendees who became clients (and friends) and have been able to cultivate excellent business opportunities both within the firm and outside through my Women's Initiative contacts.

Neuhauser: The program is multifaceted.

Please email the interviewees at jdisler@ebglaw.com or mneuhauser@ebglaw.com with questions about this interview.

We have seen outreach beyond the firm through the many partnerships that have developed between women unrelated to the firm who found ways to do business with each other. The program also helps our associate women to network and to prepare for a next step, whether that be within the firm or not. We talk about return on investment to the firm but there is also return on investment in terms of relationship-building and how people view the firm.

Editor: Are there other mentoring programs within the firm?

Neuhauser: We have an active continuing education program that provides mentoring opportunities. Moreover, we always encourage our attorneys to be inclusive in client meetings, so that not only the person who has the direct relationship with the client attends, but also associates and colleagues. We have innumerable opportunities for all of our lawyers to write articles and to participate in seminars and conferences.

Disler: We use the Women's Initiative as a mentoring tool, insofar as we try to teach associates what they need to do for their own advancement. Their "price of admission" to attend an event is that they offer names of two contacts to invite. Those contacts do not have to attend, but the process helps associates understand the value of building relationships for themselves personally and professionally. We encourage their attendance and participation and give them examples of best practices to make the most of the initiative.

Editor: Getting back to the Women's Initiative itself: why a golf clinic?

Neuhauser: The golf course is the classic place where men meet outside of work to get to know each other and make the connections that can lead to business. Most women don't golf. Some may get invited to join the guys, but unless you're really comfortable being on the course, you likely won't accept a courtesy invitation to play. The golf clinic is a way for us to introduce women to the game, to open the door.

Disler: The golf clinic is a great way for informal introductions to be made – no difference from when men meet for a round of golf.

Editor: What other programs has the Women's Initiative put on?

Neuhauser: The golf clinic is our signature event, but the program has grown and diversified over the years. Last month we hosted an after-work reception at The Mezzanine in Newark. The program featured a presentation about gender and workplace by Professor Patricia Roos from Rutgers University. About 40 women attended and the conversation was very lively.

Disler: We have also sponsored a variety of programs through our offices in Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami and New York and have hosted events ranging from wine tastings to media workshops to self-defense. The events are geared for women to learn or improve upon a skill while having fun. We hope that new personal relationships will form and existing ones will flourish. We encourage all of our female attorneys – partners and associates alike – to attend and take advantage of the networking opportunities both inside and outside the firm. We believe that it is just as important for our attorneys to meet and greet their colleagues within the firm as well as outside the firm and we encourage them to do so at our events.

Editor: Would you share with us some of Professor Roos's comments with respect to the difference between women and men in the workplace?

Neuhauser: Professor Roos discussed, from a sociologist's perspective, different ways men and women approach the workplace and the different societal factors that influence choices that men and women make in their careers. One of the scenarios she discussed involved two hypothetical employees, one male and one female who each negotiated their starting salaries. In the scenario the woman accepted a lower starting salary than her co-worker (not knowing what her male colleague had negotiated). One of Pat's points was that common behaviors, such as women being less aggressive in their salary negotiations, can lead to unintended consequences, such as unequal pay. This made for lively discussion about intent issues, disparate impact issues and societal issues versus legal issues. Interestingly, Professor Roos's remarks hit on many of the points addressed by the Supreme Court in the *Ledbetter* decision that was handed down just a week after our event. The program was not only successful, it turned out to be very cutting edge.

Disler: This was another event where

women came out after work to enjoy themselves and share their comments. We in New Jersey were delighted that they recognized the renaissance in Newark.

Editor: What other events do you have coming up?

Neuhauser: In September our Dallas office is hosting a Women's Initiative culinary event that will encompass learning new skills in an interesting venue, where our guests will have an opportunity to talk with each other, create together and come away both with business cards and having learned something.

Disler: The attendance at our events continues to grow and while we try new types of events, we keep getting wonderful feedback on the golf clinic. It's a great event that attracts great women. This will be the sixth year for our golf clinic. As the founders of the initiative, we are delighted with the growth. While we try new events to meet the needs of our clients and friends, the golf clinic is one of our most popular events.

Editor: Do you see your mission expanding in the coming years?

Neuhauser: We do see the program expanding in a few areas. One is to expand the number of women's events; another is to expand our mentoring opportunities. We have talked about hosting another after-work reception with an interesting speaker and expanding the guest list to include our men as well as our women. Attendees would be encouraged to bring contacts and engage in talk on a topical issue. We see these model programs as offering a way for the firm to expand what it does. Currently, we offer breakfast briefings and client briefings that offer real nuts-and-bolts information. Joan recently finished a very well attended briefing on the new deferred compensation law under Section 409A. We see things getting bigger and better.

Disler: We started the Women's Initiative from ideas that we had and a perceived need. We hope we have inspired others to also take advantage of these programs and get involved. As we get new people involved, there is a lot of opportunity to grow and reach further. We are pleased with the results personally and professionally. We cannot thank the firm enough for supporting us.