

Law firm promotes four women to top posts

Harter Secrest & Emery has history as a culture of diversity

By **BENNETT LOUDON**

Harter Secrest & Emery LLP, has promoted four women to senior management positions on the firm's administrative team.

Elizabeth E. Hofmeister, an attorney who was hired about 14 years ago as director of legal recruiting and professional development, is now chief legal talent officer.

Rhonda M. Noto joined the firm in 2006 as assistant director of human resources. She was promoted to HR director in 2010 and was recently named chief human resources and administrative officer.

Nicole L. Kershaw was hired about four years ago as director of business development. Within about a year, her job was expanded to include marketing. And she was promoted recently to chief business development officer.

Lisa D. Steffen, a certified public accountant hired as controller in 2007, is now the firm's chief financial officer.

The promotion of these four women into C-suite leadership roles "was driven entirely by our desire to find people who are true experts and leaders in their respective fields," said Harter Secrest managing partner Craig S. Wittlin.

"Each of them brings experience and judgment to their roles that we rely on greatly. They work with great independence and autonomy, but collaborate with each other and with our attorneys seamlessly," Wittlin said. "Most importantly, each of them has earned the complete trust and respect of the lawyers and other people they work with. The fact that they are all women is coincidence — they are the very best people we could have leading our efforts."

The promotions may be novel in the western New York market, "but for Harter Secrest & Emery it is



Kershaw



Noto

consistent with our culture," Steffen said.

"I think that's largely due to the fact that Harter Secrest is a firm that puts people first and has a very supportive culture," Hofmeister said.

When she first joined the firm, Hofmeister said she asked to work part time to have "a challenging and fulfilling career while also being able to attend to my family's needs."

"There are a lot of environments that don't do that. There are a lot of companies that wouldn't ever hire somebody as a director in a part-time role," she said.

Another example of the firm's flexibility is that Steffen works from Florida and comes to the Rochester office about one week each month.

"We've differentiated ourselves in terms of thinking outside the box," Kershaw said.

"They go out of their way to accommodate (employees) in very meaningful ways, that benefit the firm as well as their people, to keep the right talent in the right positions," Kershaw said.

"They look for ways to attract and then retain talent among the female population," so employees "know they have choices, and should their interest take them in a different direction, the firm is willing to explore and have positions that accommodate other interests," Kershaw said.

"For a firm of our size having (women) chief-level officers in all these departments is more rare than not, particularly in a market of our size," said Kershaw, who feels her input is valued by the firm.

"I have never had to struggle or felt like I had to elbow my way into



Hofmeister



Steffen

any conversation," she said.

"There's just an acknowledgment and a high level of respect for what every individual brings to the table, which you don't always see, certainly in corporate America, let alone in every law firm," she said.

For example, Maureen Alston, who was Harter Secrest managing partner from 2004 through 2012, hired Hofmeister and Steffen. Alston was one of the first female managing partners in western New York.

"That was a big draw for me," Hofmeister said.

Hofmeister's advice to aspiring professional women: "Be forgiving of yourself."

Work-life balance isn't just a women's issue, she said.

"I think it's both a woman's and a man's issue in this day and age. Balance is hard to find," she said.

"I think the balance is very much a misnomer. For me, balance is always a juggling act. My goal is to keep all the balls in the air, and on a good day I've got all the balls in the air. Sometimes you drop a ball or two, personally or professionally," she said.

Noto's advice: "Find a culture that works for you. Look at the mission and the values of an organization to make sure that it's a good fit with your personal value system."

"When I came here I found it very refreshing because so many things aligned to things that were important to me," Noto said. "If you're going to spend eight to 10 hours at work every day it ought to be something that you enjoy, that you feel good about and that you're adding value," Noto said.

Noto also said that knowing the

business you're in is important.

"It's important to understand the business and how your respective function can help that business be successful," she said.

Kershaw advised: "Find your passion."

"You're at work so many days, so many hours of your life, you should be doing something you're passionate about," Kershaw said.

Steffen's advice to women in the workplace: "Work hard and be heard."

Harter Secrest promotes men and women who achieve beyond the duties described in their job description, she said.

"It was stepping up and saying I have ideas that can improve attorney and firm performance that have allowed me to step into my current role," Steffen said.

"I examined what was going on at the firm, our practices, and said, 'I have an idea. I think this can really help,'" she said.

Steffen was mentored by the CFO before her, and she feels that she has a responsibility to do the same thing for the current director of accounting and controller.

"Because of the experience that I've had I think it's important to align your staff for future advancement," Steffen said.

For example, Steffen hired an assistant controller who has 2-year-old twins.

"I know that sometimes it can be difficult with such young children to balance the work life, so she developed her own office schedule," Steffen said.

"I want to make sure that she has every opportunity available to her no matter what her schedule is or what other things she has going on in life so that she can be able to progress in her career just the same as I have. To me that's the most important thing—that your staff are there to support you, but you are just as much there to support them," Steffen said.

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