

Women Corporate Counsel Share Career Advice, Experiences At Berkeley Law Event

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Body

The Berkeley Center for Law and Business kicked off a series addressing gender inequity in business law with a panel of corporate counsel in San Francisco on Friday.

Phuong Phillips, the general counsel of gaming company Zynga; Priya Pai, the incoming general counsel of Even Responsible Finance; Samantha Good, a partner at Kirkland & Ellis; and Katharine Martin, a partner and chair of the board at Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati discussed women in business law on a panel hosted by Startup@Berkeley Law director Deborah Kang.

The lawyers discussed the challenges-and advantages-for women in business law. Good said there is a power that comes with being the only woman in the room: she stands out. Panelists said they have all been in that situation and found ways to thrive.

"My entire career I've always been the only woman in the room," Phillips said, "The reason why I never felt intimidated: I saw myself as a peer to them. Gain the confidence. Gain the knowledge. Be prepared when you go into a meeting. And if that doesn't work, the other thing that has worked is, I'll find an advocate in the group."

Pai also said she looks for advocates, and she does so by playing to her strengths. Instead of waiting to launch new ideas in the boardroom in a large groups, she bounces her proposals off of other executives in one-on-one meetings, where, she said, she's "more effective."

That strategy allows her to grow her ideas in an authentic way. And, she said, it gives her an idea of how each executive will react to her idea when she brings it up in a larger meeting, as she's already discussed with them individually.

"I knew who was going to be behind it and who wasn't and how to address that," she said. "So that comes back to, doing your homework and being being prepared, but also getting your advocates in the room."

Ramona Collins

Advocates, sponsors and mentors also matter when women lawyers want to transition to a new role. Yet panelists said women are more likely to shy away from growing their networks, or tapping into the ones they have.

Martin said lawyers need to "figure out what we're the most comfortable with" when it comes to networking. All four panelists, and host Kang, said they've been overwhelmed by large networking events before. Phillips suggested lawyers looking to connect reach out via LinkedIn with a personal note after meeting in person; Martin said she often asks people to meet over lunch.

There are also ways to grow larger networking communities authentically, Pai said. She noted her friend began inviting women she met in fintech over for group dinners. In a small amount of time, the group has grown to more than 50 women in the industry.

"I think networking at that level, where it's actually more about friends and community, is really powerful," Pai said.

Martin added women shouldn't be afraid to use those networks to develop business—the worst case scenario, she said, is someone politely says no.

Friday's session, titled "Lessons Learned: Career Perspectives from Legal Leaders," was the first in a series hosted by The Women in Business Law Initiative at the Berkeley Center for Law and Business, which aims to address gender inequity in the legal industry. The initiative's next session June 7 will focus on addressing recruiting and integrating diverse talent.

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