

Innovative Managing Partner: Akin Gump's Kim Koopersmith

By **Maria Chutchian**

Law360, New York (October 05, 2012, 6:24 PM ET) -- Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP's U.S. managing partner Kim Koopersmith has spent almost two decades creating and expanding advancement opportunities for women and minorities both inside and outside of the firm, landing her a spot on Law360's list of America's Most Innovative Managing Partners.

Through an extensive list of programs and initiatives, Koopersmith has led the charge in helping Akin attorneys with family care responsibilities work a reduced number of hours without giving up their shot at a promotion; ensuring the firm's female attorneys maintain secure, beneficial relationships with one another; and mentoring young, diverse people who are entering law school.

She has also overseen the hiring of more women and minorities at the firm and implemented a competency-based approach to guiding Akin associates' professional development.

"One of the key things about law firm leadership is not only that you have a good, innovative idea to help the firm achieve its objectives, but [that you] can articulate those objectives in a way that can create broad support," Akin Chairman Bruce McLean, who has been working with Koopersmith for almost her entire tenure at the firm, said. "[Koopersmith] has the ability to transfer a really good idea into action because people believe in her. People have confidence in her."

Koopersmith began her career at Akin 19 years ago as a litigation partner with two young daughters. Having worked a reduced load at her previous firm, Akin agreed to let her continue her four-days-a-week schedule, making her one of the first of the firm's attorneys to do so.

She returned to a full workload about three years later, at which point she was approached by McLean to craft a firmwide policy for parents with young children who could benefit from working fewer hours but still remain on track for promotion. Koopersmith was promoted to managing partner in 2008.

The policy she worked on allows associates who cut back their working hours for family reasons to remain on track to become either counsel or partner at the firm, giving lawyers flexibility in scheduling when they work under the policy. For example, they may choose to work four or five days a week but for fewer hours each day, or regular hours for fewer days.

According to the firm, about 65 attorneys have taken advantage of the policy, which was officially implemented in 2002. McLean called the policy a "big step" for the firm that "went into action and was successful because of her leadership abilities."

Around the same time she returned to a full workload, Koopersmith became the firm's New York hiring partner. She later joined the firm's executive committee, where she oversaw recruitment, professional development and training. In those roles, she said, she became focused on creating a more diverse workforce at Akin.

One of the ways she set out to achieve this goal was through a scholarship program at New York University. The students selected receive more than a \$5,000 financial award — they also enter a mentorship program with a team of Akin lawyers and are guaranteed a position in the firm's New York summer associate program.

The firm says the scholarship has been awarded to eight students, four of whom are African-American, three of whom are Hispanic and two of whom are openly gay.

"It's been a very successful outreach, both the mentoring part and having a great people join us as associates," Koopersmith said.

Another Koopersmith-led effort to bring in more diversity at Akin is the firm's participation in the nationwide Sponsors for Educational Opportunity program, which places diverse college graduates who have been accepted into top law schools into summer internships. The program allows the students to develop relationships with attorneys at participating firms before they even begin law school and maintain a mentorship as they make their way through law school, Koopersmith said.

Akin says that under her leadership, it is participating in four of the five in which SEO sponsors a program, including New York, Washington, Houston and Los Angeles. Through the program, three African-American women have joined Akin's summer program and its very first SEO intern joined the firm in New York as a full-time associate in the fall of 2011 after graduating from Harvard Law School.

Koopersmith has focused much of her recruiting and professional development efforts on women. She heads the Women's Professional Development Initiative at the firm, instituted in 2002, through which junior attorneys receive mentorship and guidance from more senior female lawyers.

She said there have been several different projects at each of the firm's offices that fall under the initiative, but the most successful event took place in Washington, D.C., in 2011, when two-thirds of the firms' female lawyers gathered for a women's leadership conference.

The initiative includes a variety of programs largely designed around women finding success at the law firm, meeting leaders in the firm, being introduced to people inside and outside of their practice areas, and making relationships so they can hear about other women who have been successful and how they did it, Koopersmith said. There are also efforts to assist women in understanding client development and creating more opportunities for themselves, she said.

Much of her work in altering the makeup of Akin's attorneys is done through her positions on a variety of committees. Koopersmith chairs the firm's Reduced Workload Committee, spent eight consecutive years chairing the firm's Partnership Admissions Committee, and sits on both the Partner and Senior Counsel Compensation Committee and the Diversity Committee.

Outside of the workplace, Koopersmith serves on the board of Equal Justice Works, which helps provide opportunities and financial support for law students and law school graduates looking into public service careers. Akin has sponsored six fellowships — five of which went to women — under Koopersmith's leadership with that program.

Akin hiring partner David Botter, who has worked with Koopersmith largely on the firm's hiring efforts for 13 years, said she had been a leader for the firm in its efforts aimed at both women and minorities.

"She is a business person, a terrific lawyer and a terrific person, and to me that's an incredibly good combination, sort of perfect to be a leader in a law firm like this," Botter said.

Akin says that as a result of Koopersmith's efforts, 30 percent of the firm's Management Committee is comprised of female and minority partners; the firm's 15-member Diversity Committee includes seven female and six minority partners; the 28-member Pro Bono Committee includes eight female and four minority attorneys; and 25 percent of the Retirement Committee is comprised of female and minority attorneys.

Additionally, 35 percent of Akin Gump's lawyer population is made up of women, while ethnic minorities constitute 16 percent. The firm's 2012 summer associate class is 53 percent female and 27 percent are minorities.

In 2011, all four of the female candidates and five of the six minority candidates eligible for promotion to partnership at Akin were promoted, and six of the firm's 26 lateral hires were women, while three were minorities. In 2010, three of the firm's 17 lateral hires were women and another three were minorities.

Though she is largely credited with much of the firm's success in hiring and maintaining women and minority employees, Koopersmith said she hadn't set out on this path when she began her career at Akin.

"While I didn't come in with a plan to do this, it was an area I always thought was important," she said. "And as a woman with two young kids at the time, I did feel a sense of ... I hate the [phrase] 'role model,' but [being] a role model and giving people some sense of how we could do things so we were a more successful law firm."

Koopersmith's efforts go beyond women and minorities, as her overhaul of the firm's professional development program impacted associates firmwide. In 2009, she said, the firm decided to take a fresh approach to training and evaluating associates in a way that would improve their experiences at Akin.

This undertaking involved looking at and understanding what attributes of success were prevalent among more senior Akin attorneys and instituting a program aimed at developing associates' skills that would bring them similar levels of success and advancement opportunities.

For example, Koopersmith said, ownership and responsibility of one's work matter a great deal at Akin. Looking at and understanding clients' needs and how to deliver on those needs are critical components of "owning" the relationship for associates at all levels, she said.

Now in its third year of implementation, McLean said the competency-based program has widespread support among the firm's partners and makes Akin "a significantly better law firm."

Koopersmith said that while many firms look at core competencies from a training point of view, Akin puts extra emphasis on creating opportunities that ensure every attorney is able to progress and achieve success.

"I think that has been a particular focus here," she said.

--Editing by Elizabeth Bowen.

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