

ARTICLES

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## Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Husch Blackwell's Hayley Hanson, *Law360*

Hayley Hanson is a partner in Husch Blackwell LLP's Kansas City, Mo., office and leader of the firm's higher education practice group, which represents major research institutions, regional universities, private colleges, nursing and allied health schools, community colleges, proprietary schools and publicly traded school groups.

After joining Husch Blackwell in 2000 as a new associate, Hanson made the rise to partner in six years, and she was recently named an equity partner at the firm. In her representation of educational institutions, she counsels clients on compliance and governance issues, litigation and other disputes, and risk management. She also assists clients in obtaining necessary approvals for changes in control/ownership, name changes, and new campus locations.

### **Q: How did you break into what many consider to be an old boys' network?**

A: My mentor at the firm gave me excellent advice early in my career: Learn all you can from the talented people around you, but always be yourself. Emulate, but don't imitate. I think this is some of the best advice anyone could give to a young attorney. I have tried to follow this advice by learning all that I could from other excellent attorneys at my firm, while staying true to my own personality, strengths and interests. I had to develop my own style, my own way of doing things. I also identified an industry group, Higher Education, which interested me and which very few if any of the male attorneys at the firm were paying attention to. I was able to exploit that untapped field of law, and ended up creating and growing a new practice area at Husch Blackwell.

### **Q: What are the challenges of being a woman at a senior level within a law firm?**

A: Whatever challenges we face today, I think they are far less than when I started 14 years ago. I think that now most law firms, and certainly my firm, Husch Blackwell, consciously strive to create a fair and open environment in which women can succeed. Nevertheless, challenges remain. For me, the biggest challenge is still the oldest one, the one that women have always faced and always will: balancing the desire to have a meaningful and rewarding career with the equal and often greater desire to be the primary caregiver to my two young children. The tension between these two priorities is constant, and is exacerbated by the ever greater demands that sophisticated clients place on their outside counsel in a competitive marketplace.

**Q: Describe a time you encountered sexism in your career and tell us how you handled it.**

A: When I was a brand-new associate, I went to one of my first court appearances wearing a pantsuit. The federal judge informed me that he expected all female attorneys to wear a skirt suit and hosiery in his courtroom. I was completely caught off guard and, frankly, more than just a little intimidated. I responded that I would wear that type of suit to my next appearance. Now, over 14 years later, I would hope that no judge would make this kind of remark. But if one did, I think that I would be prepared by my greater experience and maturity to very politely and respectfully tell him that my suit was very appropriate for his court.

**Q: What advice would you give to an aspiring female attorney?**

A: Find your passion and develop a plan to pursue it. Don't be afraid to fail, and understand that you will learn much more from your failures than from your successes. It is important to always reinvent yourself and be willing to adjust your plan accordingly. What may have been successful for you in the past may not push you to the next level in your career. Finally, I would encourage any aspiring attorney to believe in herself and project confidence. You don't have to have all the answers, but you must make your clients feel confident in your ability.

**Q: What advice would you give to a law firm looking to increase the number of women in its partner ranks?**

A: Law firms should focus on helping female senior associates and new partners create and implement plans for developing their practices. These women are clearly high achieving and need to be supported to continue their success. I would also create a mentor program as Husch Blackwell has done. Informal support from firm leadership is invaluable — having someone stop by your office, say hello, and ask about work and life outside of work goes a long way toward nurturing talent and loyalty. Finally, I would recommend considering the needs of all attorneys with young families by respecting scheduled days off and being sensitive to child care needs.

**Q: Outside your firm, name an attorney you admire and tell us why.**

A: My mother. She graduated from college in the '60s and began her career as a physical education teacher. She always wanted to be a lawyer but was encouraged by everyone (including her family) to either be a teacher or a nurse, because “that is what women did.” She followed her dream to go to law school in 1981, when I was 6 and my sister was 9 years old. She struggled to balance going back to school with raising two children. After graduation, she worked in private practice, as an administrator for the state of Iowa, and served as the head of the Department of Personnel for the state of Iowa for more than 10 years. She showed me that you could achieve anything you set your mind to as long as you were willing to work hard. I admire her belief in herself and the example she set for me and many other women.

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