



**Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion
Centre canadien pour la diversité et l'inclusion**

Success stories

Stikeman Elliott LLP

A Canadian case study in diversity and inclusion

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Stikeman Elliott LLP: A Canadian success story in diversity and inclusion

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Thanks to Shanin Lott, Managing Director of Talent and Professional Resources and Susan Pak, Director of Student Program and Human Resources, for talking to us.

Women's advancement: creating a culture that makes it personal

Stikeman Elliott is one of Canada's leading business law firms with offices in Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, Calgary and Vancouver, as well as New York, London and Sydney. The firm describes itself as having a collaborative, entrepreneurial and collegial culture with lawyers working across the firm's different practices. It is a member of the [Law Firm Diversity and Inclusion Network](#), a group of firms working together to develop strategies and resources to increase diversity within the legal profession.

Stikeman Elliott credits their culture for attracting a broad range of legal talent that share their approach to people, innovation and law. The firm's female partner ratios are consistent with national averages across Canada; women hold leadership positions as practice group leaders, committee chairs and at the highest levels of management. Approximately 40% of students and associates are women.

As Stikeman Elliott has an overriding goal to attract and retain diverse talent, the firm promises clients the most innovative thinking and problem solving from Canada's best and brightest. The firm has received recognition for its commitment to the advancement of women in both legal and diversity circles. The firm has National and Toronto Diversity & Inclusion Committees, and a Women's Initiatives Committee which is comprised of men and women, and includes senior partners and management. The Women's Initiatives Committee is responsible for staying on top of the issues that are important to female lawyers and for developing programs to help them succeed. We spoke with Shanin Lott and Susan Pak who are both on the Women's Initiatives Committee, to learn about the work they've been doing with the group. Shanin leads all people and professional development operations and initiatives, and Susan oversees the summer and articling student program as well as lawyer training.

Making advancement for women lawyers personal

Within Stikeman Elliott, there is a belief that women's advancement is more than just a women's issue and that everyone is involved in women's success. This ties advancement for women lawyers to the firm's 'Make it Personal' philosophy which asks individuals across the organization to make themselves personally accountable. Shanin explained, "The 'Make it Personal' theme is at the center of our initiative to advance women. While firm-sponsored activities can help, in our experience, the best way to effect change is for each person to play a role, reflecting on their own behaviour and patterns and the steps they can take to advance women."

When Stikeman Elliott's partnership board identified the advancement of women lawyers as a key priority, it became a core focus for the Women's Initiatives Committee. An action plan was developed targeting the experiences and decisions that would have the greatest impact on career growth and advancement for women: mentorship, business development, skills training and networking events.

The organization started with research about what women experience "to get at the core of what people were thinking about," as Susan said. A series of focus groups was conducted with people at all levels in the firm. A third-party consultant was retained in order for people to feel free sharing feedback they might have withheld if the session had been facilitated by someone from within the firm. Both men and women participated, representing a range of experience. While some of the findings were not surprising, valuable new insights emerged from the groups: women saw that men also faced some of the same issues they experienced at work and through the discussions, men became more aware of some of the differences women encounter. The consensus emerging from the experience was that women's issues were everyone's issues.

'Make it Personal' became relevant for the Women's Initiatives Committee as their research uncovered how people working at the firm really felt about the organization. The insights from the focus groups informed the action plan they developed with four pillars to address retention, advancement to partnership, business development and leadership. The firm introduced initiatives that allowed each member of the firm to contribute personally to the advancement of women.

Making it personal with unconscious bias training

A central aspect of the goal was for each person to examine their own personal biases and how those biases can impact decisions that they make in the workplace.

To help people do this, Stikeman Elliott introduced unconscious bias workshops for all lawyers tailored specifically to the legal environment. Participants were invited to examine their own biases by taking Harvard's **Project Implicit** bias association test in advance of discussions to identify practical tools they might use to mitigate those biases.

Making it personal with team dynamics

The firm has fostered a collaborative culture by encouraging lawyers to work on a wide range of files with other lawyers, ensuring teams are diverse and developing each lawyer's expertise. To keep teams diverse, the Women's Initiatives Committee developed a visualization tool they call Work Allocation Pie Charts, which helps lawyers to understand who they work with and how work is distributed. Knowing how important work allocation is to the development of a lawyer's skills, reputation and credibility, Stikeman Elliott found that illustrating the composition of teams helped the lawyers who are staffing the files see where they need to broaden their teams, and where to expand lawyers' experience into new areas with stretch assignments.

Making it personal with office placements

The action plan also examined office design as an important consideration in the advancement of women. The firm found that the location of lawyers' offices relative to their network played a role in the work they received. As a result, floor plans are assessed and rearranged to ensure a vibrant and diverse mix of lawyers on each floor to develop new work relationships between junior and senior lawyers and to promote an expanded mentoring and sponsorship network. This isn't a one-time consideration; office placements are reviewed and moved on a regular basis to ensure fresh experiences and to foster new relationships.

Making it personal with mentoring

Mentoring is ingrained at Stikeman Elliott and considered an essential part of professional development. "In law, mentoring at every level is very important," Susan explained. Even students mentor each other; articling students mentor the summer students. Senior associates have one formal mentor, junior associates have two formal mentors and students have three formal mentors, in addition to the informal mentor relationships that naturally develop at the firm.

Mentoring relationships are opportunities for lawyers to develop wider experience and contribute to the firm's culture of diversity, especially as they extend across the firm's offices in other cities. As lawyers learn from those in other offices, the collaborative culture throughout the firm is enhanced. The mentoring program at Stikeman Elliott is an example of a successful inclusive program that increases women's advancement without being specifically *about* women.

Making it personal with families

In addition to supporting women's career development and practices, the Women's Initiatives Committee designated resources to support women in managing their workload with outside commitments. Approximately 75% of the firm's female lawyers have children, so the action plan addressed practices to support women's advancement with progressive policies on maternity

leave, flexible hours and planning resources for maternity leave, along with individual transition coaching for those returning to work after a leave.

Advice for others

By listening and taking a close look at the experiences of women in the firm, Stikeman Elliott has moved beyond the dialogue about the advancement of women with solutions that have a direct impact on women every day, affecting how they work and how their practices grow. When asked what other organizations might do to support success for women, Shanin and Susan had three recommendations that have helped their firm develop effective solutions and initiatives.

Find your own solution

Shanin advised that while it's important to learn from what others have done, each organization needs to design solutions that meet their unique needs. Her advice to customize strategies and initiatives offers everyone an opportunity to examine their own needs and develop a plan that fits their context for a tailored solution. It needs to be relevant to the organization, and to its people. As she put it, "If it doesn't speak to people and doesn't make sense in your environment, the people you're trying to reach won't hear you."

This advice extends to planning for diversity and inclusion across an organization's different locations, a consideration many of Canada's large employers contend with. Stikeman Elliott saw that the initiatives that worked some of their offices weren't necessarily meaningful for other offices. At CCDI, we often see regional differences play a role in planning, reinforcing the value for organizations to conduct employee research in focus groups and surveys, along with analysis that leads to responsive programming and initiatives.

Make it practical

Susan suggested that employers envision the desired impact on day-to-day life in the office, and to be practical with the vision for the plan and in setting reasonable expectations for what can be achieved. Stikeman Elliott's unconscious bias training, for example, was tailored to their context. The positive response from the session included feedback that the experience made people stop and think about the everyday microdecisions they make, the impact their biases have on their work and helped them consider how to mitigate those biases. Practical planning has helped the programming be relevant to the lives and the work of the people working at the law firm.

Don't be overly ambitious with the plan

Reining in ambition is an interesting piece of advice that aligns with Susan's advice to be practical. Shanin explained that the team at Stikeman Elliott found it was better to deliver a plan with manageable goals each year. The learning here was that being reasonable with goals and expectations goes further towards building internal support than "promising the moon."

Connecting women's advancement with innovation

The action plan developed by the Women's Initiative Committee at Stikeman Elliott aligns with an innate belief held by the firm, that supporting women in law is important and "all in a day's work." Shanin and Susan point to initiatives such as unconscious bias training that have shown benefits that extended beyond women's advancement, to profoundly impact the culture in the firm's offices and affect how people work together. Shanin describes a culture in the offices that has become more reflective, as people consider the decisions they make about their behaviour and actions, and how they contribute to the advancement of women.

It's widely recognized that the role that leadership plays in support of diversity and inclusion planning is essential for initiatives to succeed. Though it was important for everyone at Stikeman Elliott to hear from leadership that women's advancement was important to the firm and its future, the grassroots engagement that came from everyone else is seen as key to the plan's success. The input from the focus groups and subsequent feedback helped the firm develop the mix of initiatives that works for them. And by continuously improving the programs and the types of support the firm offers, people feel that they're being heard, which also feeds the success of their initiatives.

At the end of the day, the purpose for investing in diversity and inclusion is to support the vision and goals that organizations set for themselves. Stikeman Elliott has shown how the programming developed by the Women's Initiatives Committee has supported an inclusive culture and by bringing women's advancement forward, clients who are also committed to the advancement of women have been responsive. It has strengthened relationships and helped the firm attract more diverse and talented lawyers who can support clients with innovative thinking and problem solving.

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The Success story initiative

There is astonishingly little published that shines a light on diversity and inclusion successes in Canada, though there are many, across a wide range of organizations. Case studies referenced by trainers and leadership tend to be reporting on different countries, cultures, political and economic settings.

The goal of this initiative is to support diversity and inclusion leadership with stories that are relevant to what's happening now, here in Canada. By sharing their stories, we celebrate the successes of Canadian organizations while contributing to learning for everyone that cares about diversity and inclusion.

The employers who have developed initiatives to promote diversity and inclusion as priorities in the workplace are responding to an increasingly competitive economy that's responsive to the diversity of employees – and the country. We are grateful to those who have participated in interviews.

This series of case studies will be published monthly through 2016. Subscribing to our monthly newsletter at ccdi.ca will keep you updated with the latest case studies, which will all be posted online at ccdi.ca/successstories. For more information, contact mail@ccdi.ca.

The Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion

The CCDI has a mission to help the organizations we work with be inclusive, free of prejudice and discrimination – and to generate the awareness, dialogue and action for people to recognize diversity as an asset and not an obstacle. Through the research, reports and toolkits we develop and our workshops, events and workplace consultations, we're helping Canadian employers understand their diversity, plan for it and create inclusion.

CCDI's leadership has a proven model that's cultivated trust as an impartial third party. Our expertise is focused on the topics of inclusion that are relevant in Canada now and the regional differences that shape diversity.

A charitable organization that thinks like a business, we have created a niche with our innovative research technology and data analysis that brings a deeper understanding of Canadian diversity demographics and mindsets at any given moment.

CCDI is grateful for the support of Employer Partners across Canada. For enquiries, contact Susan Rogers, Chief Client Officer, Susan.Rogers@ccdi.ca or (416) 968-6520, ext 103.

CCDI is grateful for the ongoing support of our Founding Partners:

