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For female lawyers who left the workforce, 'returnship' can be a huge boost

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A few years ago, when [Pamela L. Zdunek](#) began considering a return to the legal profession after a 21-year absence, the economy had just tanked.

A career counselor told her even recent Harvard Law School graduates couldn't get jobs as paralegals, much less lawyers with 20 years of experience.

"Needless to say, that was a bleak time for me," she said. "I just didn't see how I would ever get back into the legal profession to practice — and certainly not at a firm."

About a year ago, Zdunek met a woman at a networking event



Ralph Greenslade

Pamela L. Zdunek (left), an associate at Sidley, Austin, LLP and an OnRamp fellow, listens to Sidley partner Elizabeth K. McCloy as she speaks during the "Attorneys In Transition: Returnships" panel discussion Thursday at Locke, Lord, Edwards LLP. About 75 people attended the seminar.



Ralph Greenslade

(From left) Pamela L. Zdunek, an associate at Sidley, Austin LLP and an OnRamp fellow; Elizabeth K. McCloy, a partner at Sidley;

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who suggested she apply for an OnRamp Fellowship, a new program designed to help women re-enter the legal profession.

After landing a spot in the inaugural class and spending her fellowship at Sidley, Austin LLP, she's now been hired as a full-time associate at the firm.

Zdunek was part of a panel on law firm "returnship" programs Thursday, sponsored by the Coalition of Women's Initiatives and held at Locke, Lord, Edwards LLP.

Law firm attorney-development professionals and corporate career re-entry experts spoke about the benefits of such programs to law firms, including maintaining a leadership pipeline and giving a talented attorney an opportunity to return to the workforce.

In her more than 20 years of experience in lawyer recruitment and development at big law firms, Caren Ulrich Stacey said she often had to make an extra effort to convince practice group leaders to consider a female applicant with a gap on her resume.

With that in mind, Stacey founded the Boulder, Colo.-based OnRamp program last year to help female attorneys looking to re-enter the workforce — women she refers to as "returners."

An important part of preparing law firms for placing such women was interviewing managing partners and other lawyers to find out what makes attorneys successful in an organization for the long term.

"The things that have made these attorneys most successful are not their technical skills, it's not their lawyering skills," she said. "It's their mindset, it's their attitude, it's how they've figured out how to manage home and work."

Those conversations, Stacey said, helped staff at the firms recognize the value of returners' skills, which fosters a more welcoming workplace environment that makes it easier for program participants to transition back in.

A returnship program is a low-risk investment for law firms, Stacey said, because it gives them a chance to see a participant's work product and doesn't require them to hire the person at the end.

OnRamp rigorously screens its participants and works with firms to find a fellow that is the right fit for them.

The program requires firms to provide an opportunity to the

Maribeth Bailey, national director of talent acquisition at Deloitte Consulting LLP; and Caren Ulrich Stacy, founder of the OnRamp fellowship program, share a laugh at the "Attorneys In Transition: Returnships" panel discussion Thursday at Locke, Lord, Edwards LLP. [For more photos, view this photo gallery»](#)

On the web

The next round of applications for the OnRamp Fellowship are due Feb. 6. To learn more about the program, visit onrampfellowship.com.

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fellow to work on complex legal projects and a partner adviser that can provide support and feedback.

Firms pay a \$125,000 stipend to the returner, which Stacey said alleviates concerns about billable-hour quotas and a set billing rate. While clients are sometimes unwilling to pay high rates for work by inexperienced associates, the set stipend encourages them to want fellows working on their matters.

"I wanted to make the risk so low for both the law firm and the client that they could say 'put the fellow on it' because they know she's good, she's got experience," Stacey said.

The stipend is less than the salary of a first- or second-year Big Law associate, Stacey said, and many fellows said they're comfortable with that because it erases some of the guilt they feel about their work capabilities.

If a group is working until 2 a.m., for example, that lesser pay grade makes it more comfortable for a returner to leave work at 11 p.m. if she needs to.

While many people think men in an organization are the biggest obstacle to returnship programs, Stacey said, many are surprisingly their biggest supporters.

"They see their wives having these issues, their sisters and they're worried about their daughters having this issue," she said. "So they have been fully embracing it."

Stacey has seen friction with some women who didn't stop working to raise their families, perhaps irritated that other women made that choice and are now trying to return. The key, she said, is confronting those tensions immediately and discussing them honestly and openly.

Eventually, the program began to attract clients' attention, Stacey said. Some began to request a fellow work on their case, as they were curious about the program. Some have contacted Stacey about developing similar programs in their internal legal departments.

Participants in the pilot stage of the program last year were Sidley; Baker, Botts LLP; Cooley LLP; and Hogan, Lovells.

Zdunek, who was the only Chicago-based fellow last year, and four other fellows have all been hired into full-time positions by their firms. Fifteen firms have signed onto the program for this year and are offering 80 positions in 24 cities.

The program does require a time investment to develop internal support for the fellows and set up coaching and training systems, said Sidley partner [Elizabeth K. McCloy](#). Some fellows are trying out new practice areas, she said, and firms need to be patient as they catch up on changes in the law and new technology.

The bigger time commitment is getting others in the firm onboard and telling them about the program so a fellow doesn't have to explain herself and her role constantly.

A common issue in law firms, McCloy said, is creating a pipeline to leadership for women, and the OnRamp program's goal to bring talented women back into the workforce is part of a solution.

"They can serve and have served as mentors to our associates," she said. "It's a twist that not many people think of, and I think it's important to see that side of it as well."

Panelists also offered advice to women who are preparing to leave the profession and those looking to re-enter.

Carol Fishman Cohen, CEO of the career re-entry website iRelaunch, said women should plan on doing quality work right before leaving so they're leaving a strong impression of themselves on fellow colleagues and managers.

That helps when reconnecting with people, she said, and those contacts build personal self-confidence for re-entry.

Cohen said women should focus on maintaining relationships with people at all levels of an organization.

"Be aware of people who are junior to you," she said. "Because those junior people will be moving up while you're on a career break and sometimes will be in a position to open a door for you."

These connections can also help overcome a resume gap and recruiters' concerns about an applicant being overqualified. Rather than trying to go through a recruiter, Cohen said, it's more beneficial to use personal connections and social networking to get an initial interview.

Being up front with a hiring manager that you're pursuing a certain position because it's the right fit for you and your current life stage and obligations can make a big difference, she said.

"Sometimes, employers just need to hear that directly from you," she said.

Cohen said the financial services industry — firms such as Deloitte, JPMorgan and Goldman Sachs — and academia have embraced returnship programs, and she anticipates more industries will catch onto it in the future.

The legal industry now has plenty of returnship models to draw from, Stacey said, it's now just a matter of firms making a commitment to launch them.

Returners should also have confidence and not be afraid to jump back in, she said.

"Your heads did not roll off your bodies just because you took a break," she said. "Part of my job is to get employers to see what you bring to the table now and even do better."

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