

## Black Female Lawyers Choose Corporate Over Private Practice

Corporate Counsel Women of Color Founder and CEO Laurie N. Robinson says minority women are not seeing enough challenging assignments come their way for their careers to grow in private practice.

By Nadra Kareem Nittle  
America's Wire

NEW YORK, NY – When Fania Washington had an opportunity to leave Winston & Strawn LLP in 2004 to work for MTV Networks, she didn't hesitate.

Washington had tired of handling cases that trickled down from the international law firm's partners, and she sought more formidable challenges. She describes the firm as a "good firm with good people." But as an African-American and a vice president and employment counsel for MTV, Washington says, "I really feel like a partner in the company."

A recent study by Corporate Counsel Women of Color (CCWC) discovered a growing trend in women of color leaving law firms to work as corporate counsels. Titled "The Perspectives of Women of Color Attorneys in Corporate Legal Departments," the study surveyed more than 1,300 African-American, Hispanic, Asian-American and Native American female corporate attorneys.

A staggering 76.5 percent of women who participated in the study started their careers in law firms before leaving for corporations. Among reasons they cited for switching were feeling that their work was not valued, lack of good mentors, desire for more challenging work and few opportunities for growth.

Previous research cited by CCWC had found a 78 percent attrition rate for women of color at law firms.

"Women of color are going to law school . . . only to work for a law firm for a couple of years," says Laurie N. Robinson, CCWC's founder and CEO.

Robinson says data counter a misconception in the legal community that large numbers of minority women leave firms because they cannot handle the work. In reality, she says, it's because women of color aren't connecting with senior managers who can facilitate their desire for more challenging assignments, often leaving them struggling to obtain billable work.

Moreover, the survey found that these women had serious doubts as to whether their plight at law firms would improve, largely because so few women of color were partners who could serve as mentors. The majority of partners at law firms are white men, making it easier for white lawyers to bond with superiors.

"If you look at the breakdown of law firms, most of the partners are Caucasian," Robinson says. "The challenge is how do we build a pipeline of people of color? Everybody at the law firms can't work at the corporations."

Dionne Greene-Punnette, U.S. markets counsel for MasterCard Worldwide, worked for law firms from 1996 to 2001 before going in-house. One firm, she says, had few African-Americans among its 700 employees.



She considered herself a high-performing attorney who routinely traveled on business, worked 15-hour days and spent nights in her office to deal with a heavy workload. Yet, she says, she questioned how far she could advance because the firm had few minority attorneys in high-ranking positions.

“It’s harder to believe it’s attainable if you don’t see it,” she says.

Like Washington, Greene-Punnetta seized the opportunity to go in-house. At MasterCard Worldwide, she has more responsibilities. “I was a litigator when I was at the firm,” she says. “I wanted to transition where I could do more advising than troubleshooting, where I was part of the solution as opposed to cleaning up the problem.”

Veta T. Richardson, executive director of the Minority Corporate Counsel Association, says that based on previous research and anecdotal examples she has encountered, the CCWC findings are no surprise.

A primary reason that women of color likely prefer the corporate setting is because corporations have valued diversity longer, she says, noting that in the 1980s, diversity was a priority as corporations contemplated doing business in a global marketplace with a varied customer base.

Law firms didn’t begin to consider diversity issues seriously until the 1990s, Richardson says, adding, “Many law firms have not had by and large a dedicated person thinking about diversity issues until the middle of the last decade.”

Washington questions whether many law firms have a serious commitment to diversity. She says that most firms pay lip service to diversity and that many don’t explore how to retain women of color or improve recruiting them.

Washington says law firms don’t examine how to retain women of color or how to attract others. She also suggest that law schools could offer a more realistic look at life in law firms and connect students with women of color partners in firms.

Richardson says firms should provide financial incentives to supervisors who make diversity a priority and should include diversity responsiveness as part of performance reviews. She suggests that firms ask: “Did the person do a good job mentoring someone of a diverse background?”

The CCWC study also says law firms could retain more women of color by providing them greater access to managing partners and executive teams, opportunities to interact with highly valued clients and quality assignments to help them build expertise on subject matter and meet billable-hour requirements.

By working with the Association of Law Firm Diversity Professionals, Robinson says she hopes to encourage law firms to review the study.

The study also says law schools can help to reduce the high attrition rate by offering seminars on overcoming barriers for women of color at law firms. The study recommends creating networking opportunities in which students can interact with attorneys of diverse backgrounds.

“What I think is really interesting is that the women didn’t spend a lot of time speaking of their race and gender as barriers,” Robinson says. “They really focused on all of the things they do to overcome these barriers in the workplace—building up their level of expertise and working hard to be successful.”