

WOMEN IN LAW

Alternate circuit to success



NATHAN SKID/CRAIN'S DETROIT BUSINESS

Kathryn Ossian, leader of the IT practice group at Miller Canfield, built her specialty over the course of her legal practice.

Women lawyers with IT talents plug in to leadership at local firms

BY CHAD HALCOM
CRAIN'S DETROIT BUSINESS

Information technology law may still carry the image of a male-dominated nerd herd, but more women attorneys are finding leadership posts at local firms

or forging market niches for their IT talents.

Southeast Michigan firms and attorney organizations say there is increasingly a path for women attorneys with an IT focus to grow a book of business and rise through the ranks.

Women who reach leadership status often follow one of two paths: coming to the legal profession from a scientific or data management background, or focusing on one specialization over time.

Kathryn Ossian, principal and leader of the information technology practice group

at **Miller, Canfield, Paddock and Stone P.L.C.**, is one who built her IT specialty over the course of her legal practice.

"It was a pretty unique path I took, and at the time not many other firms had attorneys doing what I did," she said. "But Internet use and the law involved in new media aren't very gender-specific in the practice areas and issues they bring up."

Ossian handled commercial litigation for 10 years before launching an IT practice at Miller Canfield in 1997. Now, she said, the work expanded enough for her to add two associates who are also women.

About 25.5 percent of the 377 Michigan-based attorneys in the **State Bar of Michigan** information technology section are women, said Jeremy Bisdorf, partner in IT and intellectual property law at Southfield-based **Jaffe Raitt Heuer & Weiss P.C.** and chairman of the IT section for the state bar.

That's compared with 30.5 percent of the 32,000-plus Michigan-based attorneys in all legal practices, he said.

"There is still the geek factor to consider, where a lot of guys are just more into gadgets as a part of their nature," he said. "But at the same time, it is a growth field, and so you see a lot of interest and participation from younger attorneys in breaking into that practice who have a familiarity and proficiency with computers as a part of their daily life."

The lag in gender representation is likely to change, he said, between that trend and a growth of women in leadership roles and in top new legal talent. Women accounted for 431 of 970 Michigan law school graduates in 2008, and IT could be a practice that closes the gap in representation quickly, he said.

Susan Crawford, a professor at the **University of Michigan Law School** who teaches cyber-law classes on Internet policy and regulatory agencies, said the number of women in her courses also exceeds the number of women in the profession — but she was less confident that this signaled a generational change. Crawford's experience includes sitting on the board of the **Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers**, the international nonprofit Internet policymaking body, from 2005 to 2008.

Crawford, now in her 40s, said that when she was a student she observed about a 50-50 mix of men and women pursuing IT law. And that is about the same mix in her classes today.

Women who are able to find success with

“It was a pretty unique path I took, and ... not many other firms had attorneys doing what I did.”

Kathryn Ossian, Miller Canfield

an IT specialty are typically making a strategic plan for their careers, much like their male counterparts, attorneys said.

"This isn't a field you generally come into with an English degree pre-law, after a few months' experience out of law school in real estate or family law as a (first-year associate)," said Carol Romej, shareholder at Detroit-based **Butzel Long P.C.** and co-chair of its electronic records and discovery practice group and its technology and e-commerce practice.

Romej said she assumed her leadership roles at the firm shortly joining Butzel over a decade ago.

"I was recruited from outside the firm specifically to do something like what I'm doing now. I wasn't even really looking (for a new job) then," she said.

Romej helps oversee a core group of six IT law attorneys at Butzel and said many of them are dedicated specialists who added a law degree, more than the other way around.

Mary Ann Wehr, business unit counsel for customer care and after sales at the **General Motors Co.** legal staff, and council member of the State Bar IT law section, said the small IT practice group at GM was a mostly female staff led by Jacqueline Hourigan during her tenure in IT.

The women were a mix of attorneys who had built up a technical expertise, as well as second-career attorneys like Wehr who had a background in technology — she was director of IT services at Okemos-based **ProNational Insurance Agency Inc.** before becoming an attorney in 2002.

"It is an open frontier, as a practice, and I think that's part of what made my prior business background in IT attractive enough to bring me here," she said. "But GM is also pretty diverse, both ethnically

and by gender, and that plays a role in the numbers."

Wehr moved from IT to customer care and after sales last summer.

Ossian said IT law offers an interesting mix of client needs and subjects. The IT practice work at Miller Canfield focuses largely on transactional law involving software companies or applications as assets bought or sold, but also handles software licensing, copyright law affecting new media, counseling clients on compliance with new IT regulations, even defamation and other areas where the group cooperates with other practices at the firm. Much of the work also involves helping clients find best practices, she said.

"Sometimes what becomes the best idea for a company online in terms of its marketing team's perspective isn't always the best idea from a legal perspective," she said. "So there is also a lot of cooperation between companies on determining the client's best (new media) strategies."

The electronic records and discovery team at Butzel also sorts out client needs and obligations under discovery rules in the state and federal rules of criminal procedure that cover electronic stored information, Romej said.

Romej was also an accountant handling electronic data issues at **Plante & Moran P.L.L.C.** before becoming an attorney, and took an assignment through Butzel as acting general counsel in 2000-02 for **Covisint**, which provides secure Web-based exchange of data and business transactions for large companies.

"Before I became an attorney, one of the things I observed was a knowledge gap sometimes between the specialists that attorneys hired and the attorneys who were beginning to represent companies in technology matters then," she said. "I thought that was a gap I could step into and handle well."

Wehr, who also teaches computer law as an adjunct professor at the **Thomas M. Cooley Law School** in Auburn Hills, said less than half the students have prior technical careers or backgrounds. She estimates about 30 percent of her students are women.

Chad Halcom: (313) 446-6796, chalcom@crain.com

**MILLER
CANFIELD**