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## BigLaw 'Returnship' Program Gears Up For Expansion

By **Melissa Maleske**

Law360, New York (January 30, 2015, 4:49 PM ET) -- A year after its launch, law firms are lining up to join BigLaw's first fellowship program to help women who took breaks from legal careers transition back to law firms, the program's founder said Thursday.

Since the OnRamp Fellowship's four-firm launch, 11 more firms have joined the effort and another 15 have asked to participate, founder Caren Ulrich Stacy told fellow panelists and audience members at Thursday's panel discussion "Attorneys in Transition: Returnships" at Locke Lord LLP in Chicago.

"We will likely expand, albeit slowly, with five more firms in the next month or so," she said. "We are also likely adding legal departments to the mix later this year."

The OnRamp program grants fellowships within law firms to women returning to full-time legal careers after taking long hiatuses, often to raise children or care for other relatives. There were nine fellows in OnRamp's inaugural 2014 class, and the program placed five more in January.

"Our hope is to bring back 40 to 50 women into the profession by year-end," Stacy said.

The fellowship is similar to a law firm summer associate program, with attorneys working for discrete periods within law firms. It serves almost as an extended interview for potential future permanent employment.

The program aims to address a leak in the pipeline that results in far more male partners in law firms than women, even when firms hire both sexes in equal numbers.

Stacy said employers don't have to wait for OnRamp's capacity to grow. She encouraged law firms and other employers to use OnRamp as a model, emphasizing that they need to put in the work for it to succeed.

The OnRamp fellowships hinge not just on placement in a top law firm but also on the support the OnRampers receive leading up to and during their fellowship, from resume and interview advice to mentorship and feedback throughout year.

Fellows are readied for their return to the workplace with advice and crash courses that range from CLE-eligible legal refreshers to tips on what to wear to an interview in 2015.

Sidley Austin LLP has four OnRamp fellows, and Sidley partner Liz McCloy said it was important to vet the candidates to find the best fit for each participating firm and to mentor the fellows throughout their year.

The firms need to educate their people, too. Interviewers should know the candidate is not a typical lateral hire, for instance.

McCloy also said that since the firms make no commitment to hire the fellow, they have little to lose. OnRamp requires that law firms pay the fellows \$125,000 for the year, purposely pegging the pay packages to the standard starting associate salary to take the pressure off the fellow and to make hiring fellows a risk-free initiative.

Stacy says some firms' clients have even requested that the firm assign fellows to their matters.

The fellows are attractive to them because they have low rates, she said, but she suspects the clients are also interested in the OnRamp program and how hiring career-returners could work for their company. Once employers start to see that they can benefit by helping qualified, highly educated women return to work, there won't be a need for programs like OnRamp, she said.

The panelists also gave advice to women who are returning to the workforce and employers interested in launching their own initiatives aimed at career re-entry. Two women spoke of the challenges of returning to the office, especially the technology learning curve they confronted.

Carol Fishman Cohen, founder of iRelaunch, related learning to do a spreadsheet analysis in Excel after her return to Bain Capital from an 11-year hiatus from the business world — she had learned on Lotus Notes.

"Every lawyer didn't have a computer 20 years ago," said Pamela Zdunek, an OnRamp fellow at Sidley who just returned to full-time legal work after a 21-year hiatus to raise children. "The administrative assistants still used typewriters."

Zdunek spoke of the way the Internet age has changed the course of doing business, such as the relatively recent ability for people to work from home and the way client relationships have changed. During her fellowship, she's had many opportunities for client interaction, but face-to-face contact is rarer now.

Fishman Cohen recommended that women returning to the workplace set up a LinkedIn profile. Absence from social media can be a red flag to potential employers, she said.

At one point Zdunek was asked about taking direction from associates younger than her, and she said it wasn't a problem. "My kids are always telling me me what to do," she said to laughter.

The panel was sponsored by the Coalition of Women's Initiatives in Law in partnership with Locke Lord, the National Association of Women's Lawyers and the Women's Bar Association of Illinois.

--Editing by Brian Baresch.