

## **Empowerment Award Entrant: Kensington Swan**



Video Link <https://vimeo.com/178545428/5081b7be18>

A raft of diversity initiatives at law firm Kensington Swan is helping to not only address imbalances arising from gender issues, but to also arm female staff with the confidence and skills they need to forge forward in their careers.

The firm, which has 32 partners and 140 employees, is committed to being a place where all people, regardless of gender, can thrive, says Director of People Sandra Gilliam.

“Our profession has long suffered an under representation of females in the most senior roles and we are committed to championing this issue,” she says.

“We do not want an environment where it is merely ‘ok to take time off to have children’ but rather one where you can do so and we will help you manage your various commitments and succeed.”

The drive began with partners and the senior management team undertaking a day’s training in unconscious diversity issues, which resulted in a commitment to address the particular needs of women in the firm with flexible working arrangements, training and development, and ensuring part-time workers were not disadvantaged in terms of entitlements, benefits or promotion.

Kensington Swan went on to hold workshops on diversity and unconscious bias for all staff, with additional tailored sessions for female employees, and the Board established a Diversity Steering Group to develop a programme of initiatives.

A gender-neutral working parents' policy was developed from a series of workshops open to all staff to brainstorm the issue of flexible working. Key features include 18 weeks' parental leave (topping up the government's contribution to the employee's salary), three weeks' paid leave for the secondary caregiver, access to ongoing personal development while on parental leave, flexible return to work hours and mentoring for women returning to work following parental leave.

The firm also supported initiatives such as remote working, flexi-working for women with caregiver duties at specific times, and a flexible approach to charge-out rates to enable women to retrain or upskill following parental leave.

Kensington Swan has invested in the development of women through sponsorship of two employees to Global Women and one to the Harvard University Leading Professional Services Firms. It's created a specific budget line for diversity initiatives which include attendance at industry events which promote women in the profession, confidence and resilience training for junior women, and follow-up training on unconscious bias for key decision makers at governance and management levels.

When recruiting for a new CEO recently, the firm made it mandatory for the recruitment agency to present a shortlist of candidates of both genders.

Senior women in the Wellington office, both partners and staff, have established KenPens (Pen is a female swan), a group to raise issues of relevance to women and support the development of initiatives to help women in the company, including developing a mentoring programme, breakfast sessions where women from different parts of the business share their stories, distributing relevant information from external presentations, and supporting attendance at and providing speakers for seminars and workshops.

All these changes have been fully supported by members of the Board and other key decision-makers, such as the Chief Executive and Managing Partners, who all attended the staff workshops for the opportunity to learn more about the needs of employees, Sandra says.

"These initiatives have enabled us to attract, retain and support talented women. We are an attractive option for women who want to return to the workforce after parenting, or pursue other interests or attend to other obligations and have a career in their chosen field.

"Our organisation has further benefitted by the retention of senior women in leadership roles and key client-facing roles throughout the firm. This talent benefits the firm economically, all of us as colleagues of these women, and our clients."

Currently at Kensington Swan, 32 per cent of the partnership is female and all of those women hold leadership roles, 60 per cent of Senior Associates are female, as are 50 per

cent of the Managing Partners, 50 per cent of the Directors and 43 per cent of the senior leadership team. At the last national round of Board elections, 50 per cent of those elected were women.

For employees, says Sandra, the initiatives have meant having a richer career path available, economic security when their ability to work or be at work is diminished, ongoing professional development and a sense of being valued by the firm and its clients.

Feedback from women on staff is positive.

Senior Associate Michelle Hill says, "I am fortunate to enjoy some flexibility with my office hours. I leave the office around 3.30pm two days a week and pick the children up from school. Once home, I connect back into the work server and continue my work. Similarly, when my children are sick, I am able to work from home.

"The great thing about Kensington Swan is that there seems to be a deep faith and trust that, whether I am in or away from the office, I will be delivering an excellent service to our clients. There is not that 'old-school' mentality, that many law firms still have, that leaving the office (even if you are still working remotely) is shirking one's responsibilities, which is a terrible guilt that many working mothers carry. I will go the extra mile for Kensington Swan and our clients because of this freedom."