

Empowerment Award Highly Commended: MinterEllisonRuddWatts



Video Link <https://vimeo.com/178545432/4b9b913f9b>

Championing gender diversity is part of a proud tradition at MinterEllisonRuddWatts, a top-tier New Zealand law firm with offices in Auckland and Wellington.

When Pamela Mitchell made partner at the firm in 1960, she was the first woman to achieve that rank at a large New Zealand law firm, and MinterEllisonRuddWatt has added other impressive female alumni over the years including Dame Patsy Reddy (new Governor General) and Susan Thomas (High Court Judge).

Today the firm has about 300 employees, approximately 60 per cent of them female, and can claim the highest female partner percentage of any top-tier law firm in the country, at 28 per cent. The firm also has 40 per cent female board members and a female chair.

“MinterEllisonRuddWatts is a leader in the legal industry for diversity stats and policy, but we want to do more than improve ourselves - we want to help make a positive change in the business community and the legal profession,” says People & Performance Director Odette Wilson.

With this front of mind, the firm’s Leading by Example initiative was created to empower females and inspire all staff by demonstrating that there is no one right way to succeed, there are many. The firm is working to profile strong role models for their female staff, female law students and women in the legal industry, and to be part of the solution for equity and fairness in the wider New Zealand workplace.

It also aims to highlight some of the gender-related issues still present in the legal industry and to raise the profile of the female role models at MinterEllisonRuddWatts by encouraging them to speak at conferences, seminars and in the media.

“For this initiative we didn’t do a big roll out to staff. We wanted to enact change through leadership, voice and action. We wanted people to notice our leadership, not be told about it,” says Odette.

Examples of senior leaders supporting and owning the initiative are numerous. Many have been involved in media interviews promoting gender diversity, spoken at conferences and seminars and launched charitable initiatives to support women in the community.

One such role model and diversity champion is Chair Cathy Quinn, who co-led the Prime Minister’s 2016 delegation to China and has shared her story at events such as Young Women Lawyers Association meetings.

Another partner, Stacey Shortall, was named LawFuel’s Lawyer of the Year in 2015 and a 2015 Westpac Women of Influence for her work supporting diversity and charitable initiatives, including The Mothers Project, in which MinterEllisonRuddWatts staff help incarcerated mothers reconnect with their children.

Senior Associate Julia Batchelor-Smith authored a book called *Balancing Work and Life: A Practical Guide for Lawyers*, which is now given to all MinterEllisonRuddWatts employees returning from parental leave.

The firm’s successful strategy has also focused on the recognition of senior women by international measures, which has resulted in 80 per cent of their female partners being recognised by international legal directories as leaders in their fields.

“A number of our female partners and staff have young families and other family responsibilities, and the firm helps with flexible working arrangements, and by developing the technology which allows them to work virtually at the time and place that suits them,” says Odette.

“One of our female partners is leading by example and works part time. This is very unusual in large law firms, but shows other women that it is possible to achieve both life and career goals.”

As well as The Mothers Project, Stacey Shortall has set up The Homework HELP Club, a nationwide programme that helps children in decile one schools with their homework.

A lunchtime speaker series invites influential New Zealand women to share their stories to inspire and motivate female staff. The series has been running for two years in Wellington and was started in Auckland in 2016.

The firm encourages innovative approaches to work-life balance, and recently helped Senior Solicitor Alisaundre van Ammers in her quest to train as a yoga teacher in India. She is now delivering a yoga programme in the Wellington office to help female (and male) staff manage stress and improve their wellbeing.

The Leading by Example campaign is having an effect on staff throughout the firm.

Senior Solicitor Elena Kim outlines her feeling about the initiatives. "I personally feel extremely honoured to have the privilege of working alongside exceptional women partners and seniors who not only model leadership, resilience and excellence in an industry that can seem overwhelmingly dominated by men, but also actively champion gender diversity in media, publications and at events. It is a symptom of working in a corporate space in particular that I generally find myself to be the only woman in most meetings and events - this is an example of why, for me, having strong female leaders at the firm who role model these qualities is so important."

Another employee Special Counsel Briony Davies says, "Working at MinterEllisonRuddWatts has completely changed my life. I am surrounded by strong women leaders who take active steps and lead by example to make the firm a great place to work no matter what your gender, age, background or competing work/life loyalties. Here, I am able to be good at my job, grow as a lawyer and a person, and be a good mum and wife all at once, no strings attached - who knew that was possible!"