

# Career Doctor



By Nalini Moore, Mahlab

## Dear Career Doctor

I am an intelligent, capable, hard-working second-year solicitor at a top-tier firm. I work in a good group but, while all the people in my group are really nice, I can't help but notice that the best work always goes to the other solicitors at my level, who are all males. I finished in the top 10% of my year at university, I've published articles in my practice area, I get along well with everyone and I'm always prepared to stay back and get the job done. But for some reason, I am continually overlooked when the good work gets allocated or when an opportunity to attend client functions arises. I have also noticed that I'm the only one without a 'matey' nickname, and no partners ever stop by my door for a chat about the footy and to mention some exciting work coming up. I don't think that the partners are intentionally leaving me out, but it just seems to be automatically assumed that I have nothing in common with them.

I don't want to leave this group because I like this practice area, and in any case, from what I hear it's not much different elsewhere. How can I raise my profile, without having a sex change?

## Overlooked

### Dear Overlooked

Although not as prolific in law firms in this day and age, when you encounter it, sexism is a real issue. You are quite justified in feeling that you need to be just as well recognised as your male colleagues for the quality of work you produce. To be successful in your career (whether you are male or female), you need to foster valuable client relationships, perform well in your role, produce good quality work and be recognised by others as a good performer and valuable team member. You are obviously finding that it is more difficult for you, as a female in your particular work environment, to be in a position where you can develop client relationships and gain recognition for your good work. So how do you manoeuvre yourself into the right position?

- Try the direct approach and speak to your supervising partner (obviously with tact) about your situation. Discuss your interest in working on larger matters and becoming more involved with clients, and suggest ways you could do so. For example, suggest that you attend the next marketing event or client function, or express your interest in a current matter that your partner is working on. As you mentioned, it may just be a case of being unintentionally overlooked. Once your partner is aware of the situation, they will be in a much better position to assist you. You may need to follow up this initial discussion a couple of times to generate results! If you feel that you cannot approach your supervising partner, enlist the support of an influential senior associate. If they are supportive of you and can offer some insights and strategies, it will make things a lot easier for you.
- Remember that anyone could be a potential client or a fantastic referral source. So if you are not being given the opportunities you want in your current practice group, you may still be able to attend other firm functions or other group's functions. (You need to be very careful here as you do not want to tread on other people's toes).
- If you feel you can't go to anyone within the firm, enlist the support of a mentor outside the firm. Often people removed from the situation can more easily identify the issues and suggest ways to deal with them in an unbiased and objective way.
- You have already published articles relevant to your specialist area – well done! Go one step further and offer to make an in-house presentation on your area of expertise. And to get mileage out of the work you have already done, you could then arrange an external seminar for existing and potential clients to attend at which you would be one of the presenters.
- Join related industry organisations and professional associations and attend as many of their events as possible, as they provide an excellent forum in which to network with existing and potential clients.
- Move beyond initial introductions and find out about people's businesses and interests. Put in the time and effort to develop professional relationships that you believe to be worthwhile. Do your research and next time you meet, suggest ways you and your firm could assist them with certain projects or challenges they are currently facing.
- And the most important thing to do – make sure people know what you are doing! Tell them about your career, and keep notes to refer to when your annual appraisal comes around.

Fortunately, this is no longer entirely a man's world. Go forth and get noticed!

## Career Doctor

On a broader note, you may wish to put the following tips into practice to raise your profile within the firm, with clients and within the relevant industry:

- Consider who needs to know that you exist i.e. who is the person responsible for allocating work tasks, inviting you to functions, appointing you as their solicitor and the like. Devise a plan to make yourself known to these people.
- Try and attend as many firm functions as you can. This provides an opportunity to meet or get to know better other partners and solicitors in your firm in a more relaxed setting.

**If you have a career problem that you would like the Career Doctor to address, email [nalini.moore@mahlab.com.au](mailto:nalini.moore@mahlab.com.au). The most thought-provoking questions will appear in the next edition of the YLJ. ■**

# Mahlab