

# An On-Ramp to the C-Suite

*A joint initiative aims to return motivated female lawyers to corporate counsel roles nationwide*

**A**t the entry level, men and women join the legal profession at the same rates, yet by the time they reach leadership roles, less than 20 percent of partners are women. Corporate legal departments suffer the same disparity. This leaky pipeline is partially due to women's choice to set aside their careers for child-rearing. As a recruiter, **Caren Ulrich Stacy** recognized that a highly motivated talent pool was not being tapped and created **OnRamp Fellowship** – now joined by **OnRamp In-House**, an initiative the Association of Corporate Counsel (ACC) has joined with – to reintroduce women lawyers returning to the field after an absence. Here, Stacy and **Veta T. Richardson** of ACC discuss the evolution of the program and the depth of the need to address the root causes. Their remarks have been edited for length and style.

**MCC: What is the mission behind OnRamp Fellowship?**

**Stacy:** OnRamp Fellowship is a re-entry or “returnship” platform that offers opportunities for women lawyers interested in returning to the workforce after taking time off from their legal jobs in order to raise a family or pursue other responsibilities. Women accepted into the program participate in year-long paid fellowships at law firms and now within corporate legal departments as OnRamp In-House Fellows. As part of the fellowship, OnRamp pairs returning women with advisors and career counselors and offers continuing legal education and other training to sharpen their legal and business skills.

**MCC: What was it about this project, the OnRamp Fellowship, particularly partnering with Diversity Lab, that attracted the ACC Foundation?**

**Richardson:** The motivation was the desire to make a difference and help real people overcome real barriers. For the ACC Foundation, OnRamp In-House represents more than a project; it is an opportunity for us to enlist corporate law departments to help repair the “leaky pipeline” caused when high-performing women lawyers exit the legal profession. The partnership was a natural step for the ACC Foundation to advance diversity and inclusion goals by working with a great partner, like Caren Ulrich Stacy and her team at Diversity Lab. So the strength of the partner and the ability to be a bridge back to law for women who need help is the basis for our commitment.

**MCC: Virtually all surveys of corporate law departments show them pulling work inside at an unprecedented rate. Does that make the OnRamp model more likely to succeed given that the demand may be shifting from outside counsel?**

**Richardson:** The shift among corporate counsel to bring more work in-house does present the possibility for increased hiring. In fact, 37 percent of corporate legal departments increased their in-house staff over the past year, according to the “ACC Chief Legal Officers (CLO) 2016 Survey.” We hope that these growing law departments will ensure that they are hiring diverse candidates by devoting more resources toward diversity and talent acquisition programs that provide pathways for re-entry platforms, such as OnRamp In-House.

Based on additional findings from the survey, only 4 percent of law departments are focused on attracting new talent and retaining good in-house lawyers in com-

parison with 5 percent last year. There is room for improvement here, especially as companies continue to insource work and build strong legal teams.

**MCC: This decidedly downstream approach to address the “leaky pipeline” problem raises an obvious question: What’s going on upstream at the law firms? Are they simply unwilling to take appropriate steps to make it easier for high-performing women to temporarily exit the profession, often for childbearing and child-rearing?**

**Stacy:** I worked as head of recruiting for some of the world’s top law firms for 22 years and was disheartened by the fact that each time I presented a strong candidate who had a gap in her résumé, she lost out to a lateral hire who had not taken any time off. Not a week went by when a highly qualified woman wasn’t passed over because of this career break. That was the impetus behind my decision to start the OnRamp Fellowship – I saw that there was a huge pool of legal talent being ignored.

Law firms care about this issue, but many don’t know what to do to solve it. We now have 30 firms that participate, and most hire their OnRamp fellows after the program ends. In fact, 86 percent of the fellows who have completed the year-long program have transitioned into longer term roles with law firms. But I worry that without a program in place to call attention to the problem and facilitate a solution, firms would continue to pass over these highly qualified candidates in an overwhelming number of instances. That said, I do think law firms should devote more resources to programs that recruit and then retain female employees, as well as provide support for various types of leave and opportunities to re-enter the workforce.

**MCC: The essence of the OnRamp model is to provide women who have left the profession for several years with the opportunity to demonstrate their value and, through training, to sharpen and broaden their skills. Is it fair that talented women are being asked to prove themselves all over again?**

**Stacy:** Regardless of gender, any individual entering a new job will have to prove himself or herself to the company. And as more companies implement measuring systems

to evaluate success and employee performance, this will extend to tenured employees as well. Overall, there is an expectation that all employees, active and returning, will devote time and resources toward sharpening their skills and expanding their knowledge base to better themselves and help the company stay in front of potential pitfalls. The OnRamp Fellowship provides a platform so that women who have left the profession for several years have the opportunity to ease back and get up to speed on what they missed during their hiatus.

**MCC: We recently ran an interview with a senior in-house lawyer at ConAgra who discussed the value of “authentic storytelling” for women navigating the often bumpy path to leadership in law. It sounds like your UN event with Gloria Santona provided some of that. Tell us about the event and the announcement of the corporate participants in OnRamp. What’s the value to them?**

**Richardson:** We were excited to formally launch OnRamp In-House at the ACC Foundation’s Global Women in Law event, which was held at the United Nations in New York in late June. The event honored three women leaders: Gloria Santona, executive vice president, general counsel and secretary for McDonald’s Corporation; Irina Bokova, director-general of UNESCO; and Charisse R. Lillie, fellow and vice president of community investment for Comcast Corporation and executive vice president of the Comcast Foundation.



**ACC’s work with Diversity Lab is an invigorating example of one female CEO working with another to create opportunities for women.**

– Veta T. Richardson



**OnRamp’s success is directly linked to one important metric – increasing the representation of women in leadership within legal departments.**

– Caren Ulrich Stacy

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Sunny Hostin, senior legal correspondent and analyst for ABC News, moderated a discussion with the honorees regarding how they broke through traditional barriers to become leaders and role models. The event was also our opportunity to announce the five inaugural corporate legal departments participating in OnRamp In-House: 3M, Accenture, Amazon, Bank of Montreal, and Microsoft.

**MCC:** *The Diversity Lab, with its focus on innovation and analytics, is an interesting partner. What's it been like working with them? Do you anticipate other projects together?*

**Richardson:** Working with Diversity Lab to launch OnRamp In-House has been invigorating and a concrete example of how far women have come – one female CEO working with another to create opportunities for other women. However, Caren and I recognize that there is still a long way to go before women achieve parity in the workplace. So we have enlisted ACC allies. The ACC Foundation's Women in the House (WITH) initiative was designed to foster the professional development of women in-house counsel. WITH members will assist the OnRamp In-House fellows by serving as mentors, and ACC chapters will open their educational events to invite

OnRamp In-House fellows to participate. We intend to continue to build upon the shared synergies across ACC and Diversity Lab initiatives.

**MCC:** *Define success for this initiative and for the ACC generally in advancing diversity in the profession. It's been a very difficult road for law firms. As with so many things, are clients now taking the lead?*

**Richardson:** Actually, I think innovation is taking the lead and progressive clients and law firms are willing to try new approaches that work. The OnRamp Fellowship program is proven – it works, and OnRamp In-House takes this proven approach and expands it to corporate law departments. The result is increased opportunities for women who previously had limited options and support.

**Stacy:** We define success for this initiative from several perspectives. Success is helping women who want to return to the profession by providing an effective platform to do so. Success is giving legal employers the opportunity to work with talented returning women who will add tremendous value to their organization and their clients. From an overall perspective, success for OnRamp is directly linked to one important metric – increasing the representation of women in the pipeline who have the desire and the ability to eventually move into leadership roles within law firms and legal departments.

## Collaboration

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Should litigation ensue, legal staff can access the investigation findings to prepare their case. As the matter progresses, the system provides analytics and reporting to GRC staff, returning data on outcomes, including judgments, damages and the legal costs of litigation.

All of this shared information remains connected to the initiating incident, providing a complete accounting of the full cost of compliance breaches for legal, compliance and senior management. Having the GRC and enterprise legal management systems on the same technology platform creates a closed loop between the functions by eliminating gaps in communication and facilitating information sharing and cost management for compliance incidents.

## DOJ

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really to protect financial institutions against fraud and insider abuse.<sup>19</sup> Given that individuals undeniably continue to commit fraud against, and probably within, banks today, it is readily apparent that there is still a role for FIRREA to play in today's enforcement landscape. But perhaps the DOJ's efforts investigating financial fraud would have a greater deterrent effect if it were to focus on fraud that is currently affecting today's markets, as opposed to conduct that is by and large a distant memory for most people in the financial services industry. To the point,

The complexity of managing compliance and legal efforts will not diminish in the foreseeable future. The good news, though, is that proactive legal involvement in GRC, supported by integrated enterprise technology, can help with the following:

- Reducing inefficiencies, lack of visibility, and confusion
- Controlling risk exposure and strengthening regulatory compliance
- Providing meaningful input for assurance and strategic planning

By driving good communication, manageable workflows and controlled information access, good internal collaboration can even help ensure that my beleaguered attorney friend can accomplish her goals and avoid days like the one she suffered through last year.

query how spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to collect documents that have already been produced in related but more timely cases, and dragging innocent witnesses – who are long gone from the financial services industry – clear across the country to testify as to events they do not recall from nearly 10 years ago, all in order to investigate a washed-up residential mortgage-backed securities banker, is going to deter mortgage fraud that is occurring today. We suspect that it will not. In fact, today's fraudster may be emboldened by the DOJ's continued distracted obsession with the previous decade.

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