

# The Business Side of Law

An Interview with Karen L. Braun,  
Executive Director, Sullivan & Cromwell LLP

**EDITORS' NOTE** Working with the Management Committee and members of the firm, Karen Braun leads the administrative support functions of Sullivan & Cromwell, including branch office administration, business development, communications, finance, human resources, knowledge management, operations, technology, and lawyer recruiting and professional development. Braun is a member of The Deal's Advisory Committee,



Karen L. Braun

and a member of the board of directors of the Senior Businesswomen's Forum. She is a former President (1994) and board member (1993-2000) of the Center for Disability and Elder Law. Braun completed her executive education at Harvard Business School and received her Bachelor of Arts degree, magna cum laude, from Marquette University.

**FIRM BRIEF** Headquartered in New York, Sullivan & Cromwell LLP ([sullcrom.com](http://sullcrom.com); S&C) provides the highest-quality legal advice and representation to clients around the world. The results the firm achieves have set it apart for more than 135 years and have become a model for the modern practice of law. Today, S&C is a leader in each of its core practice areas and in each of its geographic markets. S&C's success is the result of the quality of its lawyers: the most broadly and deeply trained collection of lawyers in the world.

## In a firm of this size and scale, how do you define your role?

I manage the non-legal side of S&C and I'm fortunate to have a team of professionals who are leaders in their respective fields. We manage by objective, setting priorities in areas such as business development, communications, finance, human resources, and technology.

On the legal side, I'm equally fortunate to work with the likes of our Chairman Joe Shenker and other lawyers at S&C.

Part of my role is being an active listener and facilitator, supporting the legal areas of the firm with strong administrative departments. Since we have such a talented group of individuals, we inevitably come up with creative business solutions.

## How critical is it to have that great talent not only on the legal side but also on the professional side?

The firm operates in 12 offices, located on four continents, with services available all hours of the day. It is imperative that our administrative staff work as seamlessly as our lawyers to service our clients.

## Inside the firm, what is considered to be the Sullivan & Cromwell advantage?

Two things: it's our people and our practice of getting things done. Number one, we have people who have the intellectual curiosity to be successful at problem-solving, both on the legal and non-legal sides. This curiosity is contagious and has spread from our Chairman to our newest business analyst.

The second advantage is the lack of silos at S&C. We have everybody seated at the table and we're all contributing ideas. That differentiates us and is one of the strengths of the firm.

I participated in a recent knowledge management meeting where partners, associates, technology professionals, and business development and research specialists engaged in an animated discussion to streamline the collection of information. The energy in the room was palpable, and gave everyone confidence that we were moving in the right direction.

Another example of fostering a collaborative work environment is our Chairman lunches. Rodge Cohen and Joe Shenker meet with groups of our lawyers to discuss firm developments, to give updates on business issues, and to listen to what our lawyers have to say.

An associate may come up with an idea, and we will take it back to our Associate Experience Committee or another group to think it through. If it's a good idea, it gets implemented without a lot of bureaucracy.

This type of collaborative environment – listening and responding to good ideas – is emblematic of S&C's culture.

## Is the same approach used by the practice groups?

Yes, absolutely. We have talented practice group leaders who communicate with our

lawyers typically on a monthly basis, ensuring that everyone understands goals within the practice. Practice heads also are dealing directly with the administrative staff on projects.

## When collaboration is such an important component in finding talent, how much of a focus is put on candidates' law expertise as opposed to their ability to fit into the culture?

We hire from a large number of law schools, universities, and colleges. Joe Shenker has said the only difference between him and a first-year associate is the number of years in practice. I have seen firsthand how Joe and other partners talk to our lawyers and staff, guiding them to be the best individuals in their areas that they can be.

## How critical is a diverse workforce when you have such a diverse client base?

Diversity is a vital part of the firm's ability to provide clients with the highest level of service. We need different perspectives to reach the best solution.

## Are there enough changes happening to encourage women to enter the legal field, and what advice do you give women about the opportunities for growth?

The advice I would give to a woman would be the same that I would give to a man. First, get a solid and diversified education and continue to learn. Business needs evolve and to maintain a competitive edge, a person must have a passion for knowledge. I'm looking not only for strong communication skills but also for computer science experience, business acumen, and a background in humanities in general. I'm looking for someone who will take the generalist approach and see multiple solutions to any given problem.

The second piece of advice is to understand the dynamics of a law firm, which are very different from a corporation or other professional service firm. The practice of law is a profession, with partners who have spent their entire careers at a firm. Given this loyalty, I look for people who truly care about what they are doing. I can tell you when I listen to the people at S&C, there is a sense of pride that comes from being affiliated with this firm – you can hear it in their confident voices when they say, "I work at Sullivan & Cromwell." ●