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As Pandemic Loosens, It's Time for Women to Celebrate Accomplishments

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Spring is in the air like never before. As blossoms bloom and masking mandates fall, America is ready to celebrate togetherness with new appreciation.

It's a time for renewal, and we, as leaders of the Ballard Women business resource group at Ballard Spahr, are excited about the prospect of more in-person events as the pandemic hopefully continues to recede and nice weather beckons us outside. As we dip our toes into the latest new normal with optimism, we felt compelled to look back at what we have learned over the past couple years and what it means going forward.

The ultimate takeaway: We need each other.

We always knew this, but the pandemic brought it into sharp focus. Especially as women in a field as demanding as law, we need each other professionally to get work done and we need each other personally to produce for clients without sacrificing health and well-being. Our experience comports with what has been repeatedly confirmed: Women bore a disproportionate burden of the pandemic's impact on practically every aspect of life, whether helping the kids with school, caring for sick family members, or myriad other ways.

When COVID-19 hit in earnest in March 2020, shuttering conferences and other events, we realized we had to take the initiative in keeping Ballard Women connected, that we had a valuable internal network of which we were not taking full advantage. We developed and honed programming during the height of COVID-19 in a fully remote environment. Post-pandemic, we plan to keep doing what worked during the pandemic, by maintaining, where practical, a remote attendance option for in-person events and meetings, to extend reach and enhance collaboration.

Despite working in a fully or partially remote environment all of 2021, it was a banner year for Ballard Women. We sought input on what members wanted from our resource group during 2021, and the overwhelming response was "less is more": fewer remote meetings and obligations in general. We listened and scaled back the number of activities and instead focused on fewer high-quality, high-value programs.

That includes Ballard Women Connect. Under this initiative, Ballard Women members form subgroups of around a half dozen lawyers, each with a mix of different practice areas, office locations, and experience levels. Ballard Women Connect groups meet remotely once a month. The purpose is to provide easy and practical ways for women to develop strong internal networks at the firm, enhance business development, and support each other's professional and personal growth. These activities also potentially boost retention by helping newer attorneys integrate—including those who had never been to Ballard Spahr office in person.

December 2021 marked the first full year of Ballard Women Connect, and the effort is off to a great start for 2022: Membership is up more than 40%, from 97 women in 2021 to 138 currently. Ballard Women Connect groups increased correspondingly from 16 to 24, and the initiative has garnered highly positive feedback from members.

Another Ballard Women effort that flourished over the past year is the Nonprofit Board Initiative, which helps associates and other less-experienced attorneys pursue professional and civic leadership opportunities. Under this program, we match these attorneys with nonprofit Board service opportunities compatible with their interests, as identified by more senior attorneys with a history of leadership in various organizations.

Ballard Women's 2021 successes were not just internal, but included client-facing remote events as well. Chief among these was the Ballard Women's Home Edit in March 2021. Our lawyers invited clients to this special event, where a team of professional organizers and interior designers transformed three different home workspace setups. The tips for improving workspaces for the long term engaged attendees, who left knowing how to be better organized for working at home.

To be sure, not all of our internal and external programming was strictly about business— commiseration played a role, too, especially early in COVID-19, with its jarring disruptions and life-altering repercussions. We found this commiseration just as helpful as the professionally oriented conversations, to know that we were not alone and could count on each other for support and guidance.

As spring blooms, we are excited and optimistic about the future, including the reach made possible by the hybrid environment that is here years ahead of its time due to the pandemic. But given what the world has gone through over the past two years, it's difficult not to wonder about how long it will be before we are compelled once again to make major adaptive behavioral changes, due to a COVID resurgence or something else we can't predict or even imagine. Now, though, we've proven we can do it, if we stick together.

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