

A WIN for Zurich

An Interview with **Laura J. Lazarczyk**,
Senior Vice President and Associate General Counsel, Zurich North America

EDITORS' NOTE *Laura Lazarczyk has held her current post since September 2014. She is also the Head of WIN for Zurich in North America. Prior to this, she was Vice President & Senior Assistant General Counsel. Before Zurich, she was Chief Compliance Officer, Assistant General Counsel, and Vice President, Human Resources for Rewards Network Inc.; Attorney for Pechiney (now Rio Tinto Alcan); Associate with Altheimer & Gray;*



Laura J. Lazarczyk

and Attorney for Sidley Austin. She received her B.A. in Psychology from the University of Southern California and her J.D. from DePaul University College of Law.

Would you talk about how critical the focus on women's success is for Zurich and the value in the creation of the company's Women's Innovation Network (WIN)?

The Women's Innovation Network in North America started about the time I joined the company, almost seven years ago.

It began as a group of women who got together to discuss a common topic we felt was important, which was helping each other network and develop professionally. We encouraged each other to take risks and helped align Zurich's goals of having world-class teams and a high-performing culture with a focus on supporting, empowering, and developing women for career success.

This action is critical, especially in the insurance industry, which has historically been less inclusive in terms of gender. Since its beginning at Zurich, the Women's Innovation Network was embraced by senior leadership as an important element of our strategic approach to cultivating a diverse and inclusive organization. Over the past several years, it has come into even sharper focus with more senior leadership involvement, both at our group level in Switzerland and our operations in North America.

What is the key value of WIN and what impact has it had?

WIN has gone from an informal gathering of a group of people with common interests to a formalized, structured employee resource group, with local chapters. In total, WIN at Zurich has 5,500 members with local chapters in 15 countries, including chapters in the U.S. and Switzerland. There is a lot of collaboration

among chapters. For example, we recently provided procedures and content developed in the U.S. to our colleagues who are starting a WIN chapter in South Africa.

We are proud to have grown our membership to 1,800 women in North America, which is about 44 percent of our female population. We now have participation at about 35 offices across the United States, and have held at least 65 events this year.

We went from having no budget to having one that is funded annually, and we use those funds to advance our mission.

As we've grown and become more sophisticated, the way we spend our dollars has aligned with Zurich's strategy so that WIN members can contribute to making Zurich the best global insurer, which is our ambition. WIN is focused on developing our female talent pipeline to ensure that women contribute their best so that we are successful as an organization.

How important has it been for this to not just be thought of as a women's initiative but as a business imperative?

It's critical. In North America, we are very purposeful in trying to get men to join WIN as allies. Of our 1,800 members, men comprise 5 percent of the group, and that number is growing. We know that we need to have men engaged in this conversation and we want to make sure it's not a situation where we are excluding men. We want this to be a partnership to drive the behavior changes we need organizationally for our collective success. Men share their career stories while learning and hearing about the challenges that women face. For example, it was helpful for me to hear a male executive talk about the risks he took in his career, which encouraged me to do the same to propel my career forward.

Our global leaders are heading a worldwide diversity and inclusion initiative. They held a conference in Switzerland last year where they brought in approximately 125 senior leaders from Zurich to talk about D&I. Four or five of our executive committee members were in the room and D&I was made a clear group business imperative. Our global leaders said they want to accelerate progress around D&I by being more intentional and that each of them would hold his direct reports accountable.

With that type of leadership commitment, employee resource groups become a vital way of embedding our D&I strategy. WIN can demonstrate its value to the company's culture and the bottom line.

Within WIN, we have ambassadors who are senior leaders with a passion for D&I, and many of them are men. The executive sponsor of WIN in North America is a man.

What changes do you see happening with women in the workplace today?

I feel like WIN is at its core a network to give women support and motivation to succeed in the workplace, however they define it. Through WIN, we have built the infrastructure and provided the training and education to give our members that guidance. It's a comfortable environment to start having the complex conversations about their experiences in the workplace.

We have created a network through which to coach and support each other. This community allows WIN members to actively watch for opportunities to affirmatively find those women who might not otherwise raise their hands, and encourage them to do so.

What excited you about the opportunity to lead WIN?

When I was asked to head WIN, it was a privilege, but I also felt nervous. I'm a lawyer in my "day job" so I had previously thought about D&I from a legal perspective. Being the Head of WIN has given me a chance to use more creativity. It was good for me to get out of my comfort zone.

I also have a passion for the area. I grew up in rural Indiana and come from a family of farmers. I idolized my grandfathers, one of whom only had a middle school education. As a girl, I was taught to be "seen and not heard," to do what was expected and learn to cook, sew, and clean house.

When I was in sixth grade, my grandfather asked me what I wanted to do "when I grew up." When I said I would be a lawyer, he suggested that I should instead consider becoming a nurse or a teacher. He wasn't trying to hold me back from my aspiration, but he was trying to encourage me to set a more realistic goal for myself. It was a pivotal moment in my life.

It made me passionate about working hard and motivated me to make sure I achieved my goals. It also made me feel strongly about taking advantage of opportunities in life because I don't want any woman to think there is anything she can't do. ●