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Do You Google? Catherine Lacavera Does. An Interview with Catherine Lacavera, Director of Litigation at Google

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When you step into the world that is GOOGLE, it seems more like stepping onto a college campus. You immediately notice a lot of people walking and biking around on Google colored bikes, larger than life statues of cupcakes, a 6-person conference bike in the parking lot, and a giant gumball machine in the lobby. But this isn't a college campus; this is the campus of one of the world's most successful companies. This is where Catherine Lacavera, the Director of Litigation of Google works

(or shall I say plays?). Lacavera, who also recently co-founded the CWL In-House Counsel Network with President Eliza Rodrigues and other California In-House Counsel, sat down for a one-on-one interview.

Catherine Lacavera, a Canadian native, received her B.A. Sc. and J.D. /M.B.A. from the University of Toronto, and began her career as a computer engineer. Why computer engineering? It was what Lacavera thought was the hardest thing to study and would be a very useful skill, which has proven to be true. The law is in her blood, as Lacavera's father is an attorney. However, it turns out that she may have always been destined to be the Director of Litigation at Google. A college friend recently told her that she knew that Lacavera would always end up as a lawyer in a progressive company.

Lacavera, who didn't necessarily plan on being where she is today, wants to emphasize the need for women to study engineering and other sciences, whether or not they ultimately want to become a lawyer. "There [is] this perception in engineering that you're going to go be an engineer, and ...an alternative career is one thing that's really important . . . to recognize. [T]hat [studying engineering] doesn't mean you're necessarily going to be behind a computer programming. There are other careers after that."

Prior to Google, Lacavera litigated pharmaceutical biotech patents at the prestigious Manhattan firm of White & Case, LLP and worked in a very close-knit team, several of whom she is still in touch with today. She says that women need to take more leaps of faith, to make really hard decisions, and "don't be afraid to make a change!" It wasn't easy to leave the partner track at a good firm to come across country and work for Google where she would be doing all sorts of random litigation - publicity cases in Brazil to trademark cases in Israel, areas that were not her specialty. To her, it felt like she was "stepping off her career path."

However, two years later in 2007, Google started getting sued for patent infringement almost every Friday in the Eastern District of Texas. "Suddenly, [Google was] on the radar as an attractive target, and business just started to ramp up like crazy." Lacavera has defended Google in major intellectual property litigation against the biggest companies in the world, including the Viacom case against YouTube (a Google owned entity), [1] Apple, Microsoft, and Oracle.[2] Not to mention twelve straight victories on the merits, numerous stays, favorable settlements, four jury trials in the Eastern District of Texas and multiple hearings before the International Trade Commission, and the acquisition of Motorola Mobility for \$12.5 billion. It hasn't been all roses and honey though, she's face numerous challenges with scaling up so quickly, integrating with Motorola, and with educating Google employees on how to deal with issues that may affect any current or future litigation.

Lacavera on Gender Diversity

Initially, when Lacavera was building her team she was only thinking, "Who was the best candidate for the position?" Her first four hires were men and they were the ones that brought it to her attention that they wanted more women on the team. Gender diversity was very important to her team and to Lacavera. From then on they were actively seeking to hire strong qualified women, but the pool of candidates gets narrower when you are seeking female patent litigators with engineering backgrounds. Lacavera didn't let this stop her.

"We actually had our recruiters actively go out and look for women who met the hiring criteria." They now have twenty litigators, of that seven are female, including Lacavera, which she thinks is a huge accomplishment considering that there are not that many women litigators with a technical background.

Lacavera trusts the team she's created; she doesn't try to micromanage lawyers, because she just doesn't have the time. She chooses rather to act like a firefighter and if "something's on fire, [she'll] put water on it." Perhaps it helps that Lacavera hands out assignments in a very even-handed manner. Lacavera's philosophy is that you earn everything that you get and that's why her team works so well together.

"[T]here is no jockeying for a position . . . There are no issues around who's getting what assignments or who's getting ahead. . . I think in a law firm, you have to go out and get the business. You have to be a rainmaker. The business comes to us, so there's no shortage of it. We don't have any of the reasons for politics, although people are overworked like crazy."

Silicon Valley and Women in IP

Google may not be unique in its approach to women. Lacavera was recently invited to a "Women in IP" event that was hosted by Microsoft. Microsoft actively searched the USPTO roster and identified all of the women who were practicing patent, trademark, and copyright law to invite to their events in an attempt to build a network of these women in high-technology law. Despite Google being in litigation with Microsoft, Lacavera was invited and attended. This phenomenon is not uncommon in the Valley, as women in IP may be working for a competitor's company, but nevertheless they recognize the need to build community. Lacavera believes "it is a sisterhood."

Lacavera also recognizes that Silicon Valley is an exceptional place for women. Especially with the former Google employee, Marissa Mayer becoming the new Yahoo CEO - "a young, female, pregnant person could have the head job at a major Silicon Valley company. . . that's very exciting. Is everybody there yet? Is Google there yet? No, but . . . that's evidence that we're headed in the right direction."

California Women Lawyers In-House Counsel Network

Eliza Rodrigues, President of CWL, with Lacavera and other in-house counsel throughout the state have created the new In-House Counsel Network which aims to build a network of these women in powerful in-house positions. Lacavera believes that it will help their business to be more connected with other in-house counsel. Companies are so co-dependent with each other, whether they are working together or not, and "having relationships with them just really helps [them] coordinate and helps [them] operate better." The Network will also help companies find other qualified women lawyers who may be looking to either transition into an in-house counsel position, or are looking to change companies. CWL and the In-House Counsel Network founders are working hard to create another avenue that will promote women lawyers to high positions in top companies throughout California.

"What is my career advice? The only career advice I can soundly give is, don't be afraid to make a change. . . Otherwise, you'll never know. I think change is a good thing, and I see a lot of it."

[1] Viacom alleged that YouTube infringed several of its copyrighted material, whereby YouTube claimed protection under the "Safe Harbor" provision of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act, a federal law.

[2] Oracle filed suit accusing Google of violating Java patents and copyrights in its Android OS, but a judge ruled that Oracle's Java APIs (application programming interfaces) were not eligible for copyright protection under U.S. law. The jury found that Oracle's patents were not infringed by Google.