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Exceeding Expectations: Behind the Rapid Growth of Jan Kang's WGCN

Interviews and Profiles



Jan Kang, vice president and general counsel for AOptix Technologies, knows a thing or two about Moore's Law. This law states that overall computing capabilities will double every two years. This is all too familiar to Kang, who lives and works in Silicon Valley, where Moore's Law is arguably the law

of the land. While Moore's law remains a standby in computing, when it comes to social networking, Kang has blown the traditional growth prediction out of the water.

Case in point: in November 2009, Kang founded Women's General Counsel Network (WGCN) with just five women gathered around a dinner table. Laura Weinstein, SVP and general counsel of Tapjoy, likened the dinner to a blind date with four other women. The dinner "worked out better than most of my blind dates," Kang jokes. If we consider 2009 a full year (although Kang only operated WGCN two months in 2009), according to Moore's Law, Kang would have grown WGCN to 80 members by the end of 2017. The real numbers shatter this projection: in the beginning of 2016, WGCN's members include about 270 powerful female general counsel and heads of legal departments across the United States.

Cold calls



Initially Kang proactively invited women to join WGCN. Kang insists that she is not shy, but admits

she found this period challenging. "I cold called and approached people I met at conferences. And cold calling is not my idea of a good time. It was definitely outside of my comfort zone," Kang recalls. She also observes, "I am not always comfortable in the limelight. Having a purpose and focus to grow WGCN made me a little braver."

Over time, WGCN began attracting its members by word of mouth, which became so effective that Kang now no longer actively recruits them. "WGCN members routinely recruit and introduce other women general counsel into WGCN," Kang explains. Kang observes that WGCN membership creates "an immediate rapport, recognition, trust, and spark when they meet in person at other events such as those hosted by the Association of Corporate Counsel."

Joining WGCN is somewhat like joining an exclusive club of like-minded, highly-achieved, supportive, and generous peers. To be invited and accepted to WGCN, a female in-house attorney typically has at least 8 years of legal experience, and they must be a general counsel or hold a senior legal role and management responsibility at a large company. Generally, the title is not as important as the function and significant levels of responsibilities and management.

Despite its impressive membership requirements, WGCN has always been social. Kang observes, "It is apparent that our members want to hang out with other like-minded women. They just get one another. They like talking to each other and not always about work. And, because they face many of the same challenges, they often speak the same language. The result, they can't get enough of each other!" It took almost four years to get members to agree to do something other than eat and socialize with one another. Lauren Segal, interim general counsel at Phoenix Technologies and one of the original five members, organized the first substantive program in August 2013, and there have been about a dozen since. For its members, however, it is the social gatherings that are most popular and widely attended by the WGCN members. Unsurprisingly, women general counsel are more open when they are in a supportive environment, where others understand them.

When it comes to online communication, the email listserv has been very important for WGCN. "WGCN members like to share information, learn from one another, and support each other," according to Kang. For some members, WGCN serves as a sounding board of unbiased and supportive peers. It is also an opportunity for members to confirm their judgments, discuss practice and vendor tips, and share career opportunities. "We have numerous stories of one WGCN member helping another one to be considered and hired for unique opportunities that may not have been available otherwise," Kang shares. The social and community aspects of WGCN clearly extend even beyond in-person meetings but make those meetings even more meaningful. Members will be sitting next to each other at an event, look at one another's name tags and light up, happy to connect a face to a name from the listserv.

Trust built on confidentiality

Although numerous WGCN members actively participate in the email discussions, many members are reading and paying attention even if they are not actively participating. In fact, many WGCN members save emails for future reference. "WGCN members share valuable information and insights based on personal and sometimes hard-won experiences — as well as substantive legal tips — all in an open and confidential environment," Kang says. In this way, WGCN serves as a powerful repository of information for its members.

According to Kang, "part of the WGCN value is that its members are similarly placed. They are more or less peers." There is also a level of trust and intimacy because WGCN ground rules require that all WGCN discussions are confidential. As Lauren Segal explains, "because Jan set such an open, supportive, and trusting tone at the outset, WGCN members understand that communications are to be nonjudgmental, making it a more comfortable forum to ask questions." So, clearly, camaraderie and sharing of information are important tenets of WGCN.

As the WGCN network grew, it also took on a life of its own. Kang expects that 2016 will be a big year for WGCN. She and the newly-created WGCN advisory board are formalizing the organization, setting up more explicit membership ground rules, and maybe even organizing a WGCN conference — which will absolutely have a significant social component.

The Three W's

In her WGCN journey, Kang has not only met incredible women and built a fabulous network, she has also discovered that she feels strongly about women in leadership roles, especially like-minded women with shared experiences. "Over time I have become a vocal advocate for women, which is not where I expected to end up," Kang reveals.

Sometime in her journey Kang realized that "WGCN has become an amazing force of three W's – warm, witty, and wise female general counsel. I frankly have never imagined that I would help create a community of 270 members across the United States that openly shares and helps each other to thrive and grow."

And if the previous progress is any indication, Kang's three W's will lead WGCN to even more exponential growth.

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Mack is also an award-winning (such as the prestigious ACC 2018 Top 10 30-Somethings and ABA 2022 Women of Legal Tech) general counsel, operations professional, startup advisor, public speaker, adjunct professor, and entrepreneur. She co-founded SunLaw, an organization dedicated to preparing women in-house attorneys to become general counsels and legal leaders, and WISE to help female law firm partners become rainmakers.

She has authored numerous books, including *Get on Board: Earning Your Ticket to a Corporate Board Seat*, *Fundamentals of Smart Contract Security and Blockchain Value: Transforming Business Models, Society, and Communities*. She is working on her next books: *Visual IQ for Lawyers* (ABA 2024), *The Rise of Product Lawyers: An Analytical Framework to Systematically Advise Your Clients Throughout the Product Lifecycle* (Globe Law and Business 2024), and *Legal Operations in the Age of AI and Data* (Globe Law and Business 2024).