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**'Women need to come out from behind closed doors to get the top jobs'**

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*Mirjam de Blécourt is employment lawyer and partner at Baker & McKenzie, one of the world's largest law firms.*

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# 'Women need to come out from behind closed doors to get the top jobs'

*Mirjam de Blécourt is employment lawyer and partner at Baker & McKenzie, the largest law firm in the world, and has been with the company for nearly 25 years. She is a major contributor to the current debate on dismissal law reform. De Blécourt is involved in various charities and is a vocal supporter of having more women in top jobs. 'It's not easy for women to get top managerial positions. The one thing they shouldn't do is sit in their rooms with the doors closed, waiting to be asked,' she says.*

## ***Baker & McKenzie relocated from Leidseplein to Zuidas in 2006. Not everyone thought that was a good move. Do you now feel at home here?***

I was among those who initially didn't see the point of moving. We were in the middle of the city and the Leidseplein area is a fun place. Clients from abroad used to enjoy coming to our office there. Even so, I'm used to Zuidas now. It's a pleasant location, where I often find myself bumping into friends and people I went to university with. One thing that amazes me more than anything about Zuidas - and that would never have happened had we still been located in the city centre - is how easy it is to mobilise people here to support a good cause. One of the best events I participated in last year was the Amsterdam City Swim to raise funds for the ALS Foundation. A bunch of us from different Zuidas companies started training at the Bosbaan and there was an immediate bond between us. My dream is to have our entire firm in Amsterdam join the event this year. At any rate, the employment law practice group will be there, for a very special person who also works in Zuidas.

## ***You have been with Baker & McKenzie since 1990. Could you describe your career there?***

I studied civil and fiscal law in Leiden. As a trainee lawyer at Baker & McKenzie, I was given the opportunity to work in both areas, which I did. At a certain point, though, I realised if I wanted to become really good at either of them, I would have to choose. I ended up specialising in employment law and we have a large employment department now. I worked in London and New York for short periods and the colleagues I met there have become good friends.

## ***Baker & McKenzie has some 700 partners worldwide. What does a partners' meeting look like?***

Baker & McKenzie usually books the largest hotel in town.

Spouses are invited too, so it's a pretty impressive event.

You find yourself in a conference room with 700 partners, there are big screens and flags everywhere, everyone has a voting button and the front-row seats are taken by the executive committee. It's a bit like a United Nations meeting. At meetings such as these, at global and European level, you get to know your colleagues well, which is highly conducive to international collaboration.

## ***You are known for your pursuit of a more balanced gender diversity in the workplace and you would like to see more women in top jobs. You and Marry de Gaay Fortman of Houthoff Buruma started a special programme to teach women how to become partners. Why was such a programme necessary?***

It's a fact that women are having a hard time climbing the corporate ladder to the top jobs. Marry and I got together with legal training institute OSR and a number of female partners from other law firms and started Women Around the Table. This resulted in the OSR Women Leadership Programme. What you learn isn't really all that complicated. Women work hard, are focused on content, but all too often they stay in their rooms. Networking doesn't come naturally to them and they think putting in long hours at the office will eventually lead to a partnership. Women don't like to blow their own horn by talking about big cases, publications or seminars. But if they don't, no one will know what they are up to or that they want to get ahead. Five women were recently made partner after having completed the Women Leadership Programme, so it is obviously working!

## ***Are more women at Baker & McKenzie making partner these days?***

Of the 32 partners at Baker & McKenzie, eight are women.

At Baker & McKenzie Amsterdam, the aim was to have women



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in 26% of the top jobs by 2013. We'd already reached that goal by 2011, so we upped the percentage.

***How do you combine a hectic job with your family commitments and social activities?***

I have lots of energy and I have a busy home life. We go away on short trips as often as we can. Although I love the desert, my husband and two sons are keen on kite surfing, and Brazil is the place to go for that. Family means a lot to me. My mother died recently and it had an enormous effect on me. But times like these show you just how precious family ties really are. I also have a few very good women friends. My best friend and I went to secondary school together; we've known each other since we were 12.

***Do you have any me-time left?***

I do three hours of Raja Yoga every Sunday. It gives me time to reflect. I do postures, meditate and study the philosophy of yoga. That sets me up for the week ahead. It's incredibly inspiring and calming!

***What major changes in the field of employment law can we expect in 2014?***

Employment law is set for a major shake-up in 2014 and 2015. One remarkable aspect is that the new rules will give the unions substantial power, even though their support is dwindling. Employers will only be able to deviate from the official order in which employees should be made redundant if this is made

explicit in a collective labour agreement. Perhaps most importantly, the government did not show how this new law is going to result in more jobs, which was the point of the change in the first place. The new law also puts limits on severance payments, but I do not expect they will be set in stone. I also expect the unions will try to get higher payments included in company redundancy plans. In addition, many people will turn to the courts to try and get more money. There will be an increase in legal proceedings based on claims of unfair treatment and discrimination. This is also happening in Britain, where by law redundancy payments are low. I also believe the dismissal law reforms offer a golden opportunity to align the redundancy rules for civil servants to those facing the private sector.

**Mirjam de Blécourt**

**Baker & McKenzie Amsterdam**

Mirjam de Blécourt is employment lawyer and partner at Baker & McKenzie, one of the world's largest law firms. She advises directors of multinationals on employment matters in a broad sense, from collective dismissals to issues involving works councils and trade unions. In both 2011 and 2012, De Blécourt was named best female employment lawyer in Europe. She is also one of the leading lawyers in the Netherlands to raise awareness for diversity and has a successful track record in developing and promoting female talent. Partly thanks to her efforts, Dutch company law now includes targets for the number of women on company boards. In addition, as advisory board member of the Female Cancer Foundation, she seeks to create awareness for the fight against cervical cancer. De Blécourt is also a board member of The Concertgebouw Fund.