

OnRamp: Women Reclaiming Their Careers

Employment and Labor

Career Development





Women leave the workforce for many reasons. Oftentimes, the leave is not intended to be for very long; sometimes the plan is to be gone for a year or more. Whatever the reason and the length of time away, reentry into the workforce can be difficult — especially in fields like law. Although men take extended leave from the office as well, it’s arguably more common for women to exercise this right in order to care for children and elders.

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American Express, ACC, and OnRamp

OnRamp In-House, a joint effort between the ACC Foundation and the OnRamp Fellowship program, assists experienced women lawyers reentering the legal profession after an extended hiatus from law practice. OnRamp works with top law firms and corporate legal departments to place these talented women in one-year, paid fellowships with top legal departments. One such legal department is the in-house team at American Express. Jason Halpern, managing counsel, learned about OnRamp’s

mission in early 2017 and set up time with the founder of the program, Caren Stacy. After a few conversations to learn about the program, including the comprehensive process that OnRamp puts candidates through, Jason presented to the American Express general counsel and her leadership team on the value that the OnRamp program could offer to the legal department. “Ultimately, the opportunity felt like a win all around,” says Halpern. “The OnRamp candidate gets an opportunity to reenter the legal field; OnRamp itself continues the pursuit of its goals; and American Express gets access to a diverse applicant pool of experienced candidates that may not otherwise rise to the surface during the recruitment process for open attorney roles.” Once approved to move forward, Halpern worked closely with the OnRamp team, and by the end of 2017, American Express began to include OnRamp candidates in interviews for some open attorney roles.

About OnRamp

OnRamp In-House is a joint effort by the ACC Foundation and the OnRamp Fellowship to increase the pipeline of experienced women lawyers in corporations. OnRamp places talented women lawyers who have taken an extended hiatus from practice in one year, paid fellowships with top legal departments. This unique reentry platform gives returning women a chance to broaden their experience, skills, and contacts while demonstrating their tremendous value in the marketplace. To learn more, see this PDF.

Fast forward to 2018, Julanne Montville, vice president and senior counsel, American Express, had a position to fill. “Jason saw the listing I posted and said, ‘Hey, you need to make sure that we have candidates from OnRamp in your interview pool because I think that would be a great fit for what you guys are doing.’”

American Express is based in New York; however, Montville’s office is in the Chicago area. Thinking that going through OnRamp would open up a bigger pool of candidates than they would normally see in Chicago, they went for it. “American Express had already decided to participate in the program, and we had a position to fill,” explains Montville. “However, Jeannine [Cordero] is the first person who has been hired as a result of our participation in the OnRamp program. She’s a pioneer.”

What makes a candidate like Jeannine Cordero stand out in a sea of applicants that may or may not have extended absences from a legal department on their resumes? According to Montville, the value in a program like OnRamp lies in the fact that it gives hiring attorneys a complete picture of the talent pool that exists for the position.

“A lot of the hiring processes can result in applicants who vary from the typical in any way getting overlooked,” she says. “For example, we’ll say we want someone with 10 years of experience, but that means that someone who’s been out of the workforce for 15 years may not be considered relevant.” She continues, “The benefit of OnRamp is that it forces recruiting and hiring managers to open their eyes and see all of the talent that’s really available and can do the job and fill the role. As opposed to focusing on weeding out applicants, it allows that pool to be more inclusive. You really miss out on some key talent if you’re not making sure that your applicant pool is as inclusive as possible.” Key talent, like the 25 percent of Fortune 500 general counsel and the nearly 20 percent of Fortune 501-1000 general counsel, who were women.*

*Statistics provided by OnRamp www.onramp.com.

Inclusiveness and diversity

Having an inclusive candidate pool was certainly a key driver for American Express's participation in the program. And it was equally important to Montville. They found an outstanding candidate for an open position in the legal department — a woman who had been out of the typical law department environment for 15 years. Cordero admits that she didn't intend to be gone so long (although she kept herself busy with causes of importance to her). But the absence couldn't be helped. "I loved the full-time corporate law world," Cordero says. "But slightly before his second birthday, my son was diagnosed on the autism spectrum. And at the time, he was nonverbal. We did not know what his prognosis would be." She continues, "At the same time, my employer had just exited bankruptcy, and they were offering packages to people if they wanted to leave. The time was right." Cordero took the package and was able to be on top of what her child needed. Her husband, also a lawyer with a firm, was able to take care of the finances. "That really what was the catalyst for me to stay home," Cordero adds.

Similar stories can be found across industries. Women often find themselves having to make choices between career and family. Although Montville did not have to make a similar choice in her own career, she appreciates the realities of those who do, and like many others, doesn't believe the choice should have lasting effects on the women's career. "I personally have not had to take off for an extended period of time," she says. "But I know a number of women who have, either as a result of taking care of their own children or taking care of other family members, had to move on from their current positions or take leave from the workforce. Even those women who've stayed in the workforce, but taken time off for caregiving reasons — I've seen how that can have an impact on their professional development and what employers think of them as a result of those absences."

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This is why programs like OnRamp are so important. "There are a lot of hurdles for women reentering the workforce when they take a hiatus," Cordero claims. "I think it's true of anybody, regardless of their gender. But one of the reasons why I think OnRamp is necessary is when you look around law firms and corporate law departments in their leadership, women are sorely lacking, particularly in firms. I don't know the statistics right off the top of my head for corporations, but the statistics of partners in law firms for women is really low, around maybe 18 percent or 17 percent." She continues, "That's really a disservice to our profession as lawyers."

We've all heard the saying, "We can have it all." According to Cordero, this might be true, but maybe not all at the same time. "Depending on what your priorities are, or if you have a child who has special needs like I did, you may need to take some time off from work." She continues, "There's also the tendency of other women to say, 'Well, I toughed it out, I had my kids and stayed at my job, what happened with you?' Again, there are a lot of different barriers to women reentering the workforce, and OnRamp does a great job of finding opportunities for women and creating these returnships."

Professionals, like attorneys whose skills are sought after and valuable, should not be punished for needing to take a step back from the office. "When you spend 15 years learning your craft, you have a lot of skills that you can bring to the workplace," Cordero says. "And if you're not able to get back

in it, that's talent lost." Companies who view a break in work history with negativity can miss out on some great candidates like Cordero. Montville encourages organizations to consider joining OnRamp so that they don't miss the boat. The program not only benefits the fellows, but the organization as a whole. "There are a couple of benefits to American Express for participating in the program. The first, again, is making sure the candidate pool reflects the actual talent that's out there," Montville says. "That's probably the first and most significant. Getting outside of those barriers that sometimes would weed out really excellent candidates. Another advantage is that it demonstrates to the existing workforce the support that we as a corporation have for people who take a non-traditional path into American Express."

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According to Montville, diversity goes beyond gender and racial ideals. "American Express is very proud of is its commitment to diversity, and that includes the diversity of life choices and career path," she states. "It tells the people who are here, particularly women but not only women, that you can come to American Express in a non-traditional way. We support you in your choices to have a family, to raise a family in Jeannine's case, and come into American Express."

A "commitment to diversity" is something many organizations claim, touting their practices to potential employees and beyond. But companies can do more to prove that diversity is not simply a buzzword. "A program like OnRamp demonstrates a commitment to considering diverse candidates and talent, making sure that we're picking the best person for the role regardless of how traditional or non-traditional their career path is," Montville asserts.

For her part, Cordero stayed involved in the law during her hiatus. She stayed active with the Chicago Bar Association, calling the association a professional lifeline. "[The association] kept me going out into the community at events, meeting other lawyers, interacting with others in the profession," she explains. "In addition to that, I sat on the board for various nonprofit organizations, and I was also doing pro bono special education advocacy work as well. I had to learn special education law because I was advocating for my son in the public school system."

That said, Cordero didn't quite expect to be out of the workforce as long as she was. She was offered a position just two years into her hiatus, but was not yet ready to return to a similar role to the one she left to take care of her family, including her mom and young son. She didn't start her traditional job search until about three years ago. During her search, Cordero participated in the typical process. "I did everything that I was supposed to do," she says. "I networked. I sent emails. I applied online. And I got a few interviews. But honestly, it was a lot tougher than I thought it was going to be. I guess I may have overestimated my connection to the world — to the legal world!"

Interested in learning more about OnRamp and what to expect?

As part of the screening process, applicants can expect to:

- Complete a battery of online skills, personality, and values assessments, which are similar to the hiring and development tools used in corporate environments;
- Take a writing assessment developed by writing authority Ross Guberman; and,
- Participate in a behavioral interview conducted by a lawyer-hiring expert.

Organizations who are interested in participating can expect to be asked to:

- Take a brief online survey to rate their top values, which OnRamp will use to help match candidates based on cultural fit; and,
- Participate in individual interviews with several of the organization's high-performing employees, in order to identify what makes people succeed at that particular organization.

The above is a brief overview of the process. For more information, visit www.acc-foundation.com/foundation/lpd and download the OnRamp FAQs, or contact the OnRamp Fellowship Founder Caren Ulrich Stacy at caren@diversitylab.com.

Lawyers who have at least three years of post-licensure full-time legal experience and have been away from practice for two or more years are eligible to apply for OnRamp.

Why women and companies should consider OnRamp

Once she was ready to seriously pursue a new position, Cordero reached out to her law school network. "I went to the University of Notre Dame Law School, and one of my natural channels of networking was to reach out to alum and classmates, many of whom are in the Chicago area. A woman who went to school with me invited me to a law firm event, and OnRamp was one of the presenters. The presentation was geared toward women who were like us — at the time [my former classmate and I] — not yet back in the workforce either."

> According to Montville, this process reduces one of the hurdles these candidates can face per receiving fair consideration, while also helping to eliminate the concern hiring managers may have about bringing on a hire who, in essence, could've graduated from law school 15 or 20 years ago.

Cordero was familiar with another of the presenters, iRelaunch, which has a similar mission to OnRamp and had participated in one of their previous conferences. She says both attended this event and that OnRamp presented a woman, recently hired at a law firm, who had been out of the workforce for 18 years. "She told her story, which was not unlike mine — she took time off to raise kids, but then her mother became ill," Cordero says. "That's where I first heard about OnRamp, and it looked like a great program. I didn't immediately apply, but as I was reflecting on it, I thought, well, why not? Let me see if I can manage to get through their hurdle, because they do put you through some assessments. It's not just like you put your resume in the hopper and suddenly become a fellow — it's a bit more strenuous than that."

That strenuous process was an additional selling point for Montville. "The thing that was really great about OnRamp, and the real barrier that they removed, was any sort of concern that we had about Jeannine's talent or skill before we interviewed her. Obviously, once we interviewed her, we didn't have any concerns. But the level of screening that they do and the evaluation that they provide of the candidate really made it easy to see, before we even talked to her, that she had the basic attributes we were looking for." According to Montville, this process reduces one of the hurdles these candidates can face per receiving fair consideration, while also helping to eliminate the concern hiring managers may have about bringing on a hire who, in essence, could've graduated from law school

15 or 20 years ago. “The skills are going to be different,” Montville says, “but they’ve done a current assessment of this applicant. And so, you can have that confidence that this person has a level of skill because there’s been objective evaluation involved.”

How to get involved

Applicants for OnRamp can apply online and begin the process outlined above. “That’s where the process is initiated,” Cordero says. “They give you a writing test, as well as a Myers-Briggs type assessment, which assesses your management style and personality. I think one of the strengths of OnRamp is that they can talk to somebody like Julanne here at American Express, and at least give them some information about whether or not this person might fit into your corporate culture.” She continues, “you also do a face-to-face interview, usually on Skype or something similar, with one of the counselors, and obviously fill out your work history and things like that. It’s a fairly comprehensive process.” Cordero also explains that there is a small fee involved, primarily for the assessments, but emphasized that there are no headhunting fees or the like associated with the organization.

Women helping women

Reflecting on the program’s mission, both the fellow and her manager feel it’s especially important for women to support other women who may face barriers when attempting to reenter the law department. “I firmly believe in the importance of women supporting other women,” Montville says. “I’m not someone who chose to have children, and I’ve been fortunate that I haven’t had to leave the profession for other caregiving responsibilities with my family. But it’s just that — fortune. That can happen to anybody.” She continues, “I think it’s particularly important in a profession like law or in a corporate environment, which is still very much male-dominated, that we make sure that we are accommodating the full slate of the workforce. And that means that half of those people should be women, and that means that we should be supporting women who are making other choices in order to do the important work of raising and caring for families.”

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What’s next?

You’re the hiring manager and your organization has approved implementing OnRamp into your hiring process. Or, you’ve landed the fellowship. Now what? Montville suggests that organizations integrate the fellow as a “normal” employee as much as possible. “The fellowship is a great idea, and the idea of having that one-year evaluation period is just another way to reduce a barrier or hurdle for OnRamp candidates to being hired,” she says. But she stresses, they are simply new hires. For the fellow, her advice is typical for any new addition to a legal department. “The key is to demonstrate your value as an employee,” she says. “Just treat it like this is the job that I want and this is what I would do if there wasn’t a one-year evaluation period associated with it.”

Montville went on to recommend that fellows use the fellowship part of their role to their advantage, however, suggesting that fellows follow Cordero’s example. “One of the things that Jeannine had been doing is making sure that other parts of American Express know that she was brought to us as

a result of OnRamp, that we're doing this kind of thing — talking publicly about it. Bring it up in meetings and talk about it at other public events to make sure that people are aware that the program exists and can see that employers take it seriously."

"I feel very supported here at American Express," Cordero says. "I'm excited to be, as Julanne likes to call me, the ambassador for OnRamp here. Actually, it's kind of become a surprise to both of us that it garners quite a bit of attention, but we're very pleased with that." That said, Cordero admits that integrating herself into the legal department after so much time away comes with its challenges. "Onboarding is not an easy process. I will say that of the challenges of returning to work, that was probably the biggest hurdle for me — just getting my computer, figuring out the passwords, and getting used to the technology they use." Those are normal new employee challenges, however. "The growing pains that I feel here as a new hire are the same growing pains that any new hire would feel. I want to feel useful to the organization and not be asking questions all the time! But that's just the reality for your first month or two on the job."

It's important for any new hire to feel supported, and like Montville explains, fellows are simply new hires. Luckily for Cordero, American Express takes integrating new team members seriously. "American Express has been very thoughtful in the way they introduce you to the company," she says. "I had to do a lot of training sessions online, but that was great because I was getting to know more about the company, culture, and the product. Julanne put together a schedule for me on my first week here, which was also very thoughtful. She put a lot of thought into how to bring somebody onboard and that went a long way to make me feel at home and connected here in a short timeframe."

Parting words of advice

"My advice is if you qualify to be a fellow at OnRamp is to do it," Montville says. "It seems like an organization that does a lot to support its fellows, making sure that they're having a good experience and developing a community, which is wonderful. That's probably one of the things that is hardest when you're out of the professional world — making those kinds of professional connections."

"I would suggest that [fellows] persist, because it's not easy," Cordero says. "But persistence pays off. Once I got onto the OnRamp fellowship — I was in their hopper for quite a long time, almost two years before this opportunity came up with American Express — and some of the opportunities that were forwarded to me I just didn't think were a good fit. This one was such a great fit, I immediately said, 'absolutely, I want to go for this!'" Cordero went on to discuss the support that not only American Express provides, but OnRamp itself, pointing out some of the additional benefits of the program. "They do a really nice job of supporting the candidate," she says. "One of the benefits I get is free access to a career coach once a month. The coaches donate their time. OnRamp also provides a training once a year for their fellows, and we have monthly cohort calls." According to Cordero, OnRamp pairs up approximately four fellows that would've been hired roughly within the same timeframe. "We get on the phone once a month just to kind of check in. There's also a career coach on that call, and one of our counselors from OnRamp participates. It's really just a way where we can share our wins and frustrations."

Montville thinks the cohort is a very valuable aspect of the program. "Like I said, I've been working straight through. I don't have kids, and I didn't leave the workforce. I can support Jeannine in her role here at American Express, but I don't know what the difference is — I don't know what that's like, to be gone and then come back. It's great that OnRamp provides that cohort of people who are doing the same thing and going through the same issues, because that's not something that I, as

Jeannine’s manager, could speak to.”

“I really enjoy the fact that they really thought this through,” Cordero adds. “OnRamp wants to continue to help you through that year, so that you have the tools you need to succeed.”

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