



## **I Work Almost Every Day and That's OK: Angelique Strong Marks on Being a Mom and a GC**

**Interviews and Profiles**



A modern general counsel must be a generalist and have a keen eye for the business side of law. **Angelique Strong Marks** — director, general counsel and corporate secretary at MAHLE Industries — embodies both of these qualities in full: her career has wound its way through a diverse

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set of industries, and she proudly totes an MBA that has served her in C-suite discussions.

ACC got a chance to talk to Marks about how she rose to the top of the in-house legal practice, why she "does something amazing" each year for her girls, and how she has earned flexibility from her employers.

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## **What skills really set you apart in your career?**

I think that in-house counsel need to master substantive areas in the law, but if you want to be a really successful in-house counsel, you have to understand the business side as well.

All of us can learn the law substantively and sit in business meetings and recite the law, but if you want to be useful to your corporation, you really have to understand the business and understand how to apply the law and be a problem solver.

## **Is this something you can actively work on or does it simply come with time, once you've been with your company or industry for a while?**

I think that some people are naturals at resolving problems. But there's hope: You can also gain those skills by taking business courses. I got my MBA before I started law school and it's invaluable to me in the business arena.

ACC has the [mini-MBA course](#) for lawyers that helps in-house counsel understand the business side of things, if you're not interested in going back to school to get a business degree.

## **Do you think that the C-suite is more receptive to business-minded general counsel these days?**

I think so. And that's why when businesses are recruiting top lawyers, they look for general counsel with relevant industry experience. If they're an IT company, they still look for someone who has that substantive experience. And to distinguish yourself, to really provide value, you have to know the business side.

## **You've made the switch from one industry to a very different one on several occasions. Were these transitions difficult?**

It has been difficult, but much of the difficulty is just taking the time to understand the company's business model. I started my career representing General Motors at a law firm doing employment litigation. Then I was CLO at Frank Nursery & Crafts, Inc., which was the largest solely dedicated lawn and garden retail organization in the country. Later, I did corporate securities work at two Fortune 500 companies in the electric and gas industry.

I also went into entertainment distribution and now I'm in the automotive industry. So I have been able to apply my legal knowledge and my business skills to several different industries, and I generally tell my employers that there will be a bedding-in period but I've made big industry transitions before.

After the first year at a new company, you master the learning curve and you start to understand the business. Now, can I tell you everything that happens in the engine and cooling system? No, but I've

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worked with my business partners enough to understand what I'm doing and what's important as I'm negotiating contracts with customers and with suppliers.

## **Do you think that you as a female counsel have faced any particular obstacles in your career?**

Of course. I think it would be disingenuous to say that women are treated — or received the same — as men in corporate America, for a lot of different reasons. Sometimes it's the comfort level on both parts, for instance people being familiar with a certain voice.

Particularly for me, I'm African-American and female — those were two things that I had to overcome. But if you really understand the law and you really understand the business, you very quickly gain respect no matter your background.

You may not go on the golf course with colleagues, and you may not want to. But in the office, as long as you know what you're doing, and you are protecting the company's profit margin, and insulating your colleagues and the company from exposure, then you're welcome to sit at the table with them.

But you have to know what you're doing. You have to be dedicated to learning and when you come to the table and give advice, you have to be comfortable that you've done everything you can to make sure it's the right advice.

Sometimes counsel get it wrong, but we have to do everything we can to make sure that our clients understand what the law says, how we apply it to the business, and then leave it to them to take the risk.

## **Our studies have shown that there is still a noticeable gender gap among top legal positions. Does this surprise you at all?**

It doesn't surprise me. It's unfortunate. I don't know quite how we can work around it. I think that a lot of times there are competing things going on. Sometimes women don't negotiate salaries as aggressively as men. I can't say that's true in all instances, but I believe that is the case in some instances. Unfortunately, there are still some instances in which the employer does not believe they need to pay women as much as they pay men — perhaps they feel women may have a spouse to take care of them.

I love doing my job. I'm not necessarily motivated by my salary, but it would be nice to feel comfortable in the knowledge that I'm being paid the same as my male counterparts.

## **Do you think equality in compensation is improving?**

Well, I'm not sure about compensation, but the assumption that women can't sit at the table as general counsel and be effective is definitely no longer a prevalent assumption anymore.

## **One topic that comes up time and again when we talk to in-house counsel is the difficulty of work-life balance. These days general counsel have to be plugged in all the time. How do you manage your work-life balance?**

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Can women have it all? Can we have our family life and be the moms and work in corporate America? Surely, if we're going to work highly intense jobs, we're going to have less time with our children. So we may choose not to take the highest paid and most demanding jobs if we want to spend time with our children in their formative years.

I work hard every day, but I find time to cook breakfast for my children in the morning and make sure that they're off to school. I come home at dinnertime and we sit down and we have dinner together. But when my kids are in bed, I'm back on the computer. So in that respect technology has really helped busy parents keep up with work.

But always being connected has its drawbacks. When we're on vacation, my children know that I have to give up some time to handle things for work. After that, though, I'll shut down and I'll spend time with my children. That's kind of the agreement I reach with my employers: "I will give you some of my vacation, but it has to be within this set period of time."

I work every day and that's OK. Because I always try to do some pretty great things. I just actually took off two weeks to take a break and I went to Tanzania and I did a triathlon that included climbing Mount Kilimanjaro (*pictured above*)!

So each year I try to do something amazing for myself and something amazing with my children. I took them to Uganda two years ago and we traveled to the source of the Nile, and the equator line. And so now I've told them that every three years we will visit countries in Africa. Next year we'll go back and we'll do Tanzania, Kenya and then Uganda. In the interim, we take amazing trips and do amazing things a little closer to home — last year we went to Nuevo Vallerto, Mexico. I am also very engaged in their day-to-day activities and frequently volunteer at their school — I have even coached both of their math teams!

These experiences and my workout in the morning let me take a breather and find balance. So I have a balance, but it's just not a traditional balance that somebody would think about particularly when people come in-house, thinking "I'm done with the firm, life is going to be easy."

So you work hard, but you just have to figure out how you make it work for you.

### **Have you benefited from any formal work-life balance programs at work?**

Not really. Although I have had very understanding employers. I tell people all the time that the way to get flexibility is to meet your deliverables.

My colleagues may get emails from me all day on Saturday or Sunday, or 3 o'clock in the morning on a Tuesday night, or 11 o'clock on a Friday night, but they are not concerned because I meet my goals.

Also, I'm very open about sharing my family life and my experiences with my children with my colleagues. And so my employers become vested in me as a person, and my life with my children.

### **And finally, do you have any advice for younger women entering the in-house field?**

I think that we have to understand our priorities and understand what's important to us, and set a

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creative business plan for our lives. I know it sounds very corporate, but if you want to reach a goal, you have to set a path to get there.

Some people believe they want to be general counsel, but they prefer to be specialized. And being a general counsel means you're all over the place.

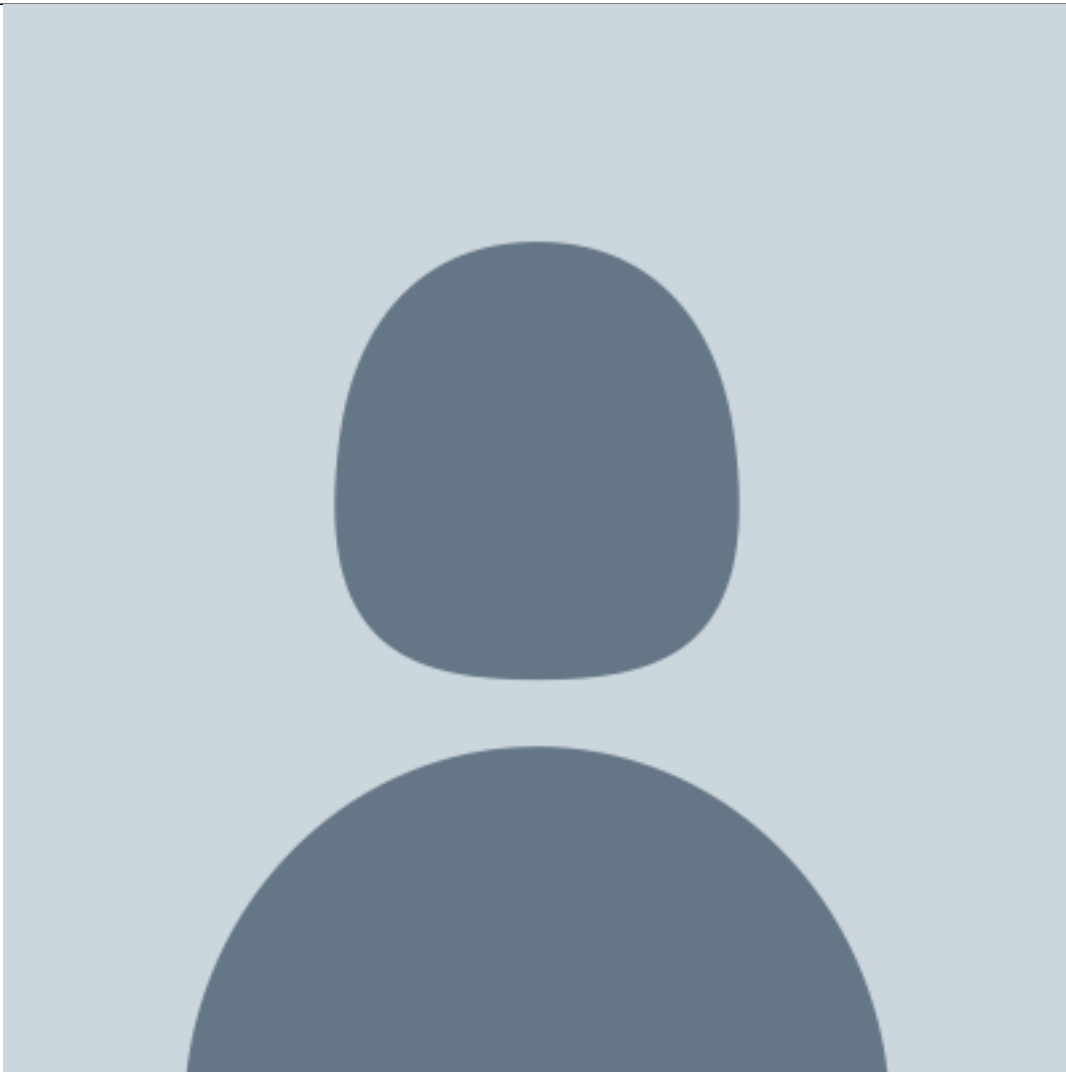
Some people believe they want to work at a Fortune 500 company, but they also want to be a mom highly engaged in all their children's activities and volunteer at the school on a regular basis, which may make it difficult to do but not impossible. So you might have to choose between the timing of these goals.

I just think we have to look realistically at what's important to us. It can't just be about title, position and money. It would be nice to think that the world is going to change, and that you can have everything at once, but at some point you will have to balance your goals and figure out how you're going to do it all.

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*Angelique Strong Marks serves as director, general counsel, corporate secretary and compliance officer for MAHLE Industries Inc., a multi-billion dollar Tier One Automotive Supplier with more than 30 locations and over 10,000 employees throughout the United States, Mexico and Canada. Prior to her career at MAHLE, Ms. Strong Marks, who was the first African-American woman to serve as general counsel of a Michigan publicly traded company, held several senior legal roles in Fortune 500 and private multinational companies. Ms. Strong Marks has served as on the State Bar of Michigan Board of Commissioners, the American Bar Association House of Delegates and Michigan Lawyers Weekly Board of Editors. Her honors include Michigan Chronicles Woman of Excellence, D. Augustus Straker Bar Association Trailblazer, Michigan Lawyer's Weekly Up and Coming Lawyer and Michigan Lawyers Weekly In-House Leaders in the Law, Crain's Business 40 under 40 and State Bar of Michigan Citizen Lawyer. In 2015, Savoy Magazine honored Ms. Strong Marks as one of the Nation's Most Influential Black Lawyers. She recently completed the Mt. Kilimanjaro Triathlon, which including reaching the highest peak of Mt. Kilimanjaro (Uhuru Peak), a 25 mile bike ride and running a marathon. Ms. Strong Marks has two wonderful daughters, Amari Ajene and Jalia Iman.*

[Nic Carter](#)



Editorial Coordinator

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