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IP firm taps Janice Mitrius as head; a 1st

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Banner & Witcoff Ltd., an 88-year-old Chicago intellectual property firm, has elected its first woman president.

Janice V. Mitrius, 42, a mechanical engineer as well as a lawyer, has been with the firm for 11 years.

It's rare for a woman to head an IP law firm, observers say.

The chair of the Women in IP Law committee of the American Intellectual Property Law Association, Daphne C. Lainson, said the only other IP firm she could name with a female chief is Sughrue, Mion PLLC, in Washington, D.C. Cindy Weber is managing partner of Sughrue.

"Although the numbers have shifted dramatically over the past decade, the patent bar is still overwhelmingly male," according to Professor Dennis D. Crouch of the University of Missouri School of Law.

But Crouch said there are a number of women heading major IP departments, such as Sharon R. Barner in Chicago who "runs Foley & Lardner's massive intellectual property department."

And Katherine Kelly Lutton is global head of litigation for Fish & Richardson, a huge IP firm that started in Boston and has more than 450 lawyers, Crouch said.

Crouch writes the law blog PatentlyO at www.patentlyo.com.

Banner & Witcoff has more than 90 lawyers in Chicago, Washington, D.C., Boston, and Portland, Ore.

Mitrius, its new leader, said she has litigated 60 or more patent cases for clients like Kimberly-Clark, Nike, Sandia National Laboratories and Allstate Insurance Co. since joining the firm in 1997.

Those cases are widely varied and include Internet sales methods, injection molding equipment, diapers, feminine hygiene products, instant messaging, athletic shoes, steam turbine engines, plastic processing and extrusions, voting machines, railroad cars and rapid prototyping.

"I think that's a great part about our firm.... We don't restrict people on the types of cases they can work on," Mitrius said.

"It really gives a kind of excitement to your job to have all these things you can be involved in instead of doing the same thing day after day," she added.

Mitrius has been a member of Banner & Witcoff's seven-member Board of Directors for just over four years. The firm has had other women on the board, she said, but "none had ever been elected president."

The board, chosen by the firm's 46 class A shareholders or equity partners, elected Mitrius to the presidency last Wednesday.

"We are thrilled to announce Janice as our first woman president," said former president Thomas K. Pratt. "Janice's superb legal and business instincts give her a unique edge in her litigation practice and will serve her well in her new position as president."

Mitrius got her degree in mechanical engineering at the Illinois Institute of Technology in 1988. She worked as an engineer in Phoenix from 1989 to 1994 for AlliedSignal Engines, today known as Honeywell International.

She got a master's degree in business administration from the University of Phoenix in 1994 and her law degree from Arizona State University in 1997.

As president, Mitrius said, "one of the main things I want to do is to make sure we've taken all necessary steps to position the firm and our clients to weather the storm in the financial world and other industries."

So far, she said, Banner & Witcoff has "not seen a downturn in work and we have not laid off any attorneys because of economic conditions ... nor do we have any plans to lay off attorneys."

In 2008, the firm procured more design patents for clients than any other firm in the U.S. for the third year in a row. Design patents are the second most common type of patent.