Diversity in Law Firms - Myth vs. Reality

Diversity has been one of the most discussed topics in law firms over the past few decades. Firms like Skadden established policies that supported diversity long before the concept of “diversity in workplaces” was universally recognized. The reason was simple – human beings do differentiate themselves into groups based on race, ethnicity, and gender and bond with people inside or outside one’s affinity circle. It’s not always one-way traffic. International law firms understood this earlier than others.

Diversity in law firms is required for different and disparate reasons

For example, a corrupt politician of a third-world country would be resistant to working with a lawyer from his home country, but he would be agreeable to appoint someone who is not of his country or race. On the other hand, if it is a case of domestic dispute, the same man would prefer a lawyer from his home country, as it would be easier to communicate issues that are culturally conditioned. So client preference changes according to the nature of the client’s problem. In most cases, getting to work with a lawyer who shares the client’s own cultural conditioning or other distinguishing features helps to put a client in a comfort zone. Big law firms understood this quite early and pushed to increase diversity among the workforce in response to target markets.

The Equal Employment Opportunity (“EEO”) and Affirmative Action (“AA”) laws brought into the law firm workspace a set of different reasons to sport and exhibit diversity. Big corporate clients wanted to show the world that they were choosy in their selection of vendors and service providers. In the end, a law firm is nothing more than another service provider, so the choice went to law firms which complied with EEO/AA and helped the corporate client retain its image. Now the big law firms are pushing to establish further diversity in the workplace to comply with EEO/AA.

Myths of workplace diversity in law firms

There are some myths about workplace diversity that are common to law firms and other service sector industries:

- Diversity compliance is a problem: Actually it is an opportunity to differentiate your firm from others and gain a competitive edge.
- Diversity is an HR problem: Maintaining diversity is everyone’s problem and that includes every partner, administrator, staff, and associate.
- Diversity means merely ensuring there is no race or gender discrimination: Wrong, diversity empowers your firm to establish comfortable channels of communication between your internal components (attorneys, employees) and external network (clients, service providers).
- Diversity is only about compliance with EEO/AA: Wrong, diversity builds business and concerns all staff and clients – EEO/AA concerns itself usually and only with minorities and women.

Diversity in the workplace increases law firm success

There are some law firms that have truly started to understand the importance of diversity beyond target markets and EEO compliance, and these law firms understand that diversity forces people to accept and incorporate new ideas and methods of operation. Ultimately, diversity benefits the law firm and the legal industry as a whole.

However, the implementation of a diverse work place helps to screen and filter people who operate under a
set of beliefs that may harm the firm’s reputation. Diverse workplaces create an optimal environment where the best from different groups grow together by sharing ideas, working hard, and creating heightened awareness of the global nature of business in today’s legal market.

Through communicating with a diverse group of employees, a firm will be able to expand through clear communication and innovative arguments incorporating a variety of viewpoints. Additionally, the firm will be geared to expand in the ever-growing global legal market. Increasing diversity in the workplace is a win-win for any law firm.