New Faces, New Ideas: Diversity in Law Firms Makes Business Sense, Part 2

This is the second of a two-part article on diversity in law firms. This first article examined why more law firms are recognizing the value of having a diverse workplace. This second part provides ideas for recruiting and retaining an inclusive workforce and offers some advice to smaller firms.

Commitment to having a diverse workforce takes a long-term approach. You cannot just rush out and hire one or two minorities or a few women or Hispanics. You have to take the long view towards recruitment and retention if you want it to work.

Recruiting
So often, the first response organizations have to the idea of becoming more diverse is "But we are unable to find anyone who is qualified." In today’s world, however, that is no longer an excuse. "That attitude does not work anymore," says Virginia Grant, a senior consultant with Altman Weil, Inc., a global legal consultancy headquartered in suburban Philadelphia. Lawyers are in the business of problem solving, so that excuse is unacceptable." You just have to take the time to figure it out, she notes, and today, that is so much easier because opportunities abound for finding all kinds of talented associates.

"It is true that if you are always going to the same places to recruit that you always have, you probably will not find the talent you are looking for," says Aasia Mustakeem, a partner in the Atlanta office of Powell and Goldstein, LLP, and also the chair of the Committee on Racial and Ethnic Diversity of the United States Law Firm Group. "I am not saying that you should not keep looking at the top schools, it is just that you also need to reach out and send invitations to new organizations on those campuses for their members to drop resumes with your firm." Most campuses will have bar associations for Blacks, homosexuals, women, Hispanics, and Asian/Pacific Islanders. Ms. Mustakeem advises firms who are committed to finding diverse talent to make it a point to reach out to these student organizations to drop resumes with your firm.

There are many other resources also available to law firms. "Recruit at minority jobs fairs, or partner with historically black colleges, such as Howard University, which has a law school," Mustakeem suggests. "Check out the National Bar Association meetings of the various minority bars. They typically have student-recruiting opportunities, where you can meet with students who are interested in exploring opportunities with your firm.” Check out local resources. Powell and Goldstein is one of the founding members of the Atlanta Large Law Firm Diversity Alliance, which was formed to raise awareness and help firms find diverse associates and partners.

That is just for starters. You can easily join up with recruiting firms who are geared toward providing a diverse candidate slate to law departments and firms, notes Ms. Grant.

You can also tackle recruiting in other ways as well, says Ralph Martin, a partner in the Boston office of Bingham McCutchen, LLP, and chair of the firm’s Diversity Task Force. "You can tackle it on the front end with your summer associates, at the mid level through lateral recruitment of associates, and at the partner level by looking to recruit partners to your firm whose backgrounds and experiences are going to add to the overall capability of dynamism in your firm.

"Some firms think that having 'homegrown' talent is the only way to go," Mr. Martin continues. "That is my expression for someone who comes in the door as a first-year and is raised internally to the point where he or she eventually becomes a partner. That has its merits, but we have found that we can recruit really good talent and increase our diversity by recruiting on at least three levels."

Retaining
Recruiting, however, is only the first step. "It is one thing to get them in the door and park them in an office," says Mustakeem, but if you are not including them in training and client activities, it is not going to take them long to realize they are just window dressing."

The way you retain members of a diverse workforce is the way you retain any quality attorney with your firm: you make a concerted effort to train them and included them in client development. "We have a specific training program for our attorneys," explains Mustakeem, "which includes a technical evaluation at their third-year mark to make sure that they have been involved in the kinds of development and opportunities to develop the skills in their legal area. That way, you make sure all of your associates are getting the same opportunities."
Grant concurs. "You have to make sure your internal house is in order for all your associates," she says. "You need to keep track of what your firm is doing in terms of distributing work or assigning practice groups, to be sure no lawyers are falling through the cracks." In addition, she points out, the environment has to promote inclusiveness and be a sustaining environment for all lawyers.

Mentoring programs are essential for retaining talent, says Martin. "We know from personal experience how important mentoring is, but it cannot be taken lightly," he warns. Mentors help associates understand both the formal and informal paths to success at the firm. At Bingham McCutchen, they do not insist that the mentor be from the same affinity group. "Our program is really designed to match mentors to mentees in a way that is effective, rather than to do it in an unstructured way. We want to find the right match because this is a long-term relationship and its success is dependent on the team building a good relationship."

Smaller firms
Smaller firms may not feel they have the same resources to compete with larger firms for talent, much less for attorneys from diverse backgrounds, but there are several ways they can boost their diversity recruitment. Start with a grassroots program," suggests Grant. Approach promising college students or even high school and middle school ones. Institute a mentoring program for students at those levels and identify potential candidates whom you can support and send to law school, she advises.

Hire a diversity consultant. There are many who specialize in helping firms locate and recruit minorities and women, says Mustakeem. Her best piece of advice for smaller firms, however, is word of mouth. "Let other firms know you are looking," she recommends, "especially larger firms. They may have several people who are well qualified, but not the right fit, and they can recommend that the candidate may want to contact you."

What it all comes down to, says Martin, is that if you think becoming more diverse is the right thing to do—that it reflects the values of the people in your organization—then it is easy to make the transition. But it is more than just the right thing to do. It makes your organization better because by having the diversity of experience, background, and training, you will be better able to serve your clients.