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INSIGHT ON DIVERSITY

Diverse Attorney Retention: A Two-Way Street

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Special to the Legal

The expansive reach of the Internet and the inescapable web of social networks have resulted in a smaller and more interdependent global society. The easy exchange of information and ideas worldwide has caused the chasm that once existed between global cultures to be narrowed in modern society.

At the forefront of our new global society is the issue of diversity and its beneficial value and utility in the workplace. Businesses, both locally and abroad, are now cognizant of diversity as a means of survival in the global economy. The legal community has taken notice of the need for diversity, and law firms specifically have created diversity committees that emphasize the importance of maintaining a diverse attorney population.

These committees develop innovative tactics focused on diversity recruitment and have adopted numerous strategies aimed at achieving a critical mass of diverse attorneys in their firms. As an alum of the Philadelphia Diversity Law Group, I can personally attest to the dedication and success of Philadelphia legal community's efforts to recruit diverse attorneys.

Despite the concerted efforts to achieve this critical mass of diverse attorneys, law firms have not achieved their desired



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outcome. Although many explanations exist, one critical factor in the inability of law firms to maintain a critical mass is due to the fact that diverse attorneys continue to exit law firms at an alarming rate. Even law firms that have developed successful recruiting methods appear unable to retain the diverse talent acquired.

According to the National Association for Law Placement's 2009 Associate Attrition survey, 87 percent of racially and ethnically diverse attorneys left their firms by the fifth year — a staggering number. This statistic highlights a perplexing issue: What is causing diverse attorneys to leave the legal field despite the efforts put forth by law firms? How can law firms remedy this leak in the pipeline of diverse talent?

It is clear that law firms can no longer focus solely on the recruitment of diverse attorneys. The retention of diverse attorneys must be given equal attention. If diverse attorneys continue to exit through the revolving door, the recruitment

efforts of law firms are for naught, and a vibrant diverse community cannot exist.

The retention issue is crippling the entire diversity initiative. It would be naive to search for a one-size-fits-all answer for all firms throughout the nation. Finding an answer to the retention problem will take a collective effort from both law firms and diverse attorneys. Law firms must provide reasons for those diverse attorneys to stay employed within these firms. Diverse attorneys must commit not only to stay at their firms but also to aid in achieving a diverse and inclusive community within the firm by sharing their positive experiences.

An organization's paradigm of inclusiveness is a firm foundation to build any programs aimed at diverse attorney retention. I realize no law firm is perfect, but I believe the following cultural and organizational paradigms that are in place at my current firm have been instrumental in my desire to commit to my firm indefinitely.

DIVERSITY OF MENTORS

A critical element in the development of my legal skills as well as social capital in my firm has been the mentorship program. Since the beginning of my career, a partner at my firm has guided my professional career. Through our weekly interactions, my mentor tracked the number of my substantive assignments. He

also advocated for my inclusion on projects that provided exposure to a wide array of work with varying degrees of complexity.

I was critiqued when my work was not up to par. I was encouraged when I performed well. Most importantly, my mentor treated me as an attorney of the firm without placing any emphasis on my diversity.

My mentor does not look like me. We do not share the same cultural background, nor are we in the same stage of our legal careers. However, even as the formal portion of our mentorship has ended, I am constantly seeking his advice and his guidance because of the relationship we developed in our mentor/mentee relationship.

Additionally, I have adopted several “informal” mentors. Although I was never assigned these mentors, through the projects I worked on and other social interactions, I developed relationships with senior associates whom I have found to be integral to my success at the firm. Similarly, most of these attorneys are not diverse attorneys. In fact, we are very dissimilar in many ways. Despite our differences, they have taken an interest in my success and have offered me support and advice.

This formal and informal mentorship was essential to my integration in the firm. While the formal mentor provided me with a starting point and allowed me to learn the legal ropes from an accomplished attorney, the informal mentors provided me with a sense of belonging and a sense of camaraderie. The willingness of the non-diverse attorneys to go out of their way to make me feel included, and my willingness to seek out those attorneys, resulted in relationships that I treasure both on a personal and professional level.

DIVERSITY OF WORK

I firmly believe that I have been given the same type of work opportunities as non-diverse attorneys. My department provides its younger attorneys the opportunity to work on different facets of our practice, which has resulted in a gradual and thorough education

and understanding of the practice. As my responsibilities have grown, I have been given opportunities to work with clients on a more personal level.

One critical benefit of being exposed to a diversity of work is that I have had an opportunity to work with most of the partners and associates in my department, and these opportunities have blossomed into professional as well as social relationships. I now have an understanding of working styles and the areas of expertise held by different attorneys. I see the potential for growth as a lawyer in my field of law. Additionally, I do not feel pigeonholed into one specific type of work, which many diverse attorneys cite as a reason for leaving their respective firms.

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DIVERSE ATTORNEY ROLE MODELS

I am fortunate enough to work at a law firm where several diverse attorneys are a constant source of inspiration. These attorneys have given their professional careers to my law firm. Not only did they forgo the opportunity to exit through the revolving door but they have also risen to the partnership ranks of our firm as well-respected and successful attorneys. These attorneys continue to tirelessly assist younger diverse attorneys to navigate their legal careers. I am challenged by their careers and reminded that their efforts have paved the way for diverse

attorneys. I am inspired to do the same for the next generation of diverse attorneys.

I am just beginning my legal career. Yet, I am confident that I will remain a member of my firm as long as I am given the opportunity to be meaningfully included in the firm’s culture and work.

Diverse attorneys will not stay at law firms because they are given preferential treatment. Instead, they are seeking the same opportunities as any other associate: the opportunity to hone their legal skills; the chance to develop clients; and the benefit of personal relationships with other colleagues in the firm.

If given these opportunities to be immersed into the firm’s cultural and organizational framework, diverse attorneys must also respond in kind. Diverse attorneys who have a foot in the door must commit to their respective firms and commit to enriching the diverse community within those firms. Diverse attorneys cannot sit back and wait for change to come; they must become a catalyst for change. Then and only then can the path to retention and the true value of diversity be forged for the future of the legal community. •