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Insight on Diversity

## Turning the Corner on Diversity to Push Boundaries on Retention

Ginene A. Lewis, The Legal Intelligencer

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Over the past decade, diversity efforts across the legal profession have burgeoned as research demonstrates that organizations with inclusive cultures have higher profitability than those without. Nearly every major law firm has committed hundreds of thousands (and for some, millions) of dollars on strategy efforts ranging from diversity committees charged with recruiting diverse talent to pipeline programs that target diverse students looking to start a legal career. National and local resource groups such as the Minority Corporate Counsel Association, the National LGBT Bar Association, and the Philadelphia Diversity Law Group have also worked alongside legal employers to advance diversity and inclusion across the profession. Why is it then that, despite diversity efforts being a top priority, the legal profession continues to lag desperately behind others in cultivating inclusive work environments? Even more troubling, why are diverse attorneys nearly absent from the top rungs of the legal profession's opportunity ladder?

While the answers to both questions are too complex to fully address in this column, both queries highlight the daunting challenge of retaining diverse attorneys in legal organizations. Beyond surface-level initiatives that primarily focus on recruitment and hiring, few substantive resources exist for assisting diverse attorneys with ascending to partnership and senior-level positions. And while recruitment and hiring initiatives have resulted in increased rates of diverse attorneys entering law firms and legal departments, such progress is somewhat elusive as diverse attorneys continue to leave their organizations at disproportionate rates and are less likely to be promoted.

Fortunately, most legal employers acknowledge that retention is not a self-correcting problem—that is, building and maintaining an inclusive work environment will not occur organically over time even as diverse attorneys enter the profession at increased rates. Rather, institutional intervention that, first, understands why diverse attorneys leave and, second, actively addresses raised concerns through both formal and informal mechanisms is critical to enhanced retention. This requires legal employers to review and seriously consider feedback provided through employee surveys, self-evaluations, confidential interviews, and exit interviews, among other things. These information sources should not be used as empty formalities but rather invaluable tools for providing critical insight into improving employee relations.

It is also important that legal employers commit ongoing resources to the career development of diverse attorneys beyond the initial hiring phase. Many diverse attorneys cite the lack of opportunities for growth and development as a driving factor for job dissatisfaction and early departure. To build and sustain a diverse environment, legal employers must be committed to developing diverse talent for long-term success. This can be achieved through implementing developmental opportunities such as

substantive training, equitable work distribution, client-facing opportunities and access to key decision-makers. Formal mentorship and coaching opportunities also provide diverse attorneys with one-on-one feedback and insight into core competencies that are critical for success.

In addition, diverse attorneys are looking for legal employers who not only communicate the "diversity and inclusion" message also but demonstrate their commitment through senior management diversity. In other words, it is important that legal organizations practice what they preach. Senior management diversity is validation that the legal organization recognizes and promotes hard work, as well as enables people of diverse backgrounds to perform at their highest levels. Diverse attorneys are becoming increasingly indifferent to a legal organization's financial commitment to affinity groups and diversity committees where that organization's partnership or senior management is devoid of diversity. Diverse attorneys are seeking role models and career roadmaps that they may follow or be inspired by. And although the lack of diversity in senior management may not ultimately deter a diverse attorney from accepting employment opportunities, it is not uncommon for this shortcoming to create opportunity barriers as diverse attorneys struggle to see a clear path to partnership or senior management.

The reality is that no one reaps the benefits of a culturally inclusive work environment unless the varied knowledge, experiences, and perspectives of diverse attorneys are fully integrated into an organization's strategies and goals. Recruitment is only the start to building and maintaining a legal profession that is stronger, more productive, and better equipped to address the challenges of today and tomorrow. Legal organizations must also give equal attention to the development and promotion of diverse attorneys who are already in the thick of their careers. As legal organizations begin to turn the corner on diversity, we must all work to ensure that diverse attorneys are present at every level of the profession. Until then, we are only scratching the surface of truly cultivating an inclusive environment where everyone is empowered to thrive. •

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*Ginene A. Lewis is associate counsel in the legal & compliance division of The Vanguard Group, where she handles litigation and shareholder services. Prior to joining Vanguard, Ginene was a litigation associate at Drinker Biddle & Reath and law clerk to Judge Petrese B. Tucker in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania.*

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