

Inside Out > column



By Christina Martini
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By David Susler
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The retention challenge

Here's another installment of Inside Out with law firm partner Christina Martini and in-house counsel David Susler. They are not only lawyers who practice on different sides of the table, but they are also married. Watch them talk more about this topic with Andy Shaw at ChicagoLawyerMagazine.com.

How much do companies weigh diversity when hiring law firms?

Susler: The answer varies by company, however, the number has increased in recent years. In-house law departments have been on the leading edge of diversity over the past decade. Increasingly, companies track diversity metrics and look for substantive diversity, diverse attorneys with true equity stakes in their firms and in the matters to which they are assigned to work.

Some companies have established minimum percentages of their legal spend that must go to women- and minority-owned law firms.

Most companies will work with firms to improve their diversity representation. However, firms must demonstrate not only increasing efforts but also results over time.

At some point, law departments will stop sending business to firms that do not show results.

What are some of the challenges in recruiting more female and minority attorneys to law firms?

Martini: Over the past several years, recruiting legal talent has presented some distinct challenges. Law school enrollment overall has been decreasing in recent years and there had already been a significant decrease in minority student enrollment a number of years ago.

There have also been fewer summer associate and entry-level spots available at many

firms when compared to historic hiring demands.

The end result is that today there are fewer opportunities to hire women and minorities at the entry level.

These supply-and-demand issues extend to lateral recruitment. Unfortunately, the number of women and minorities significantly drops off over time, particularly among the more senior ranks, in law firms. With fewer women and minorities among the senior ranks from which to choose, it is often a greater challenge to effectively recruit from this group.

Is it a bigger challenge to recruit or to retain female and minority attorneys?

Susler: Retention is the greater challenge and it lies primarily in truly incorporating women and minority attorneys into the fabric of the firm/law department.

There are many ways to achieve inclusion, including mentoring, training, providing opportunities and making people stakeholders.

Partners and senior attorneys must start with mentoring all attorneys equally, including women and minorities. They must train these diverse attorneys not only how to practice law but also how to manage — attorneys and staff, legal matters, practices, client relationships and the business of the firm/department.

They must provide opportunities to participate in meaningful ways on client matters, with clients, in business development, in firm/department management and recruiting.

Diverse attorneys must be made stakeholders, which can be achieved by doing the foregoing. Success in this area requires commitment from top management on down. Making diversity and inclusion an important part of

performance management, a meaningful metric with consequences for failure, is an excellent way to ensure success.

Martini: It is definitely a bigger challenge to retain women and minority attorneys. Retention presents the same opportunities, rewards and challenges that you find in any relationship. People change and grow, as do their law firms.

The trick is to stay in alignment and for each to mutually contribute to the other — the lawyer to the firm and the firm to the lawyer.

I am a Latina partner who has been at the same law firm for 19 years. I am very fortunate to have found an organization that has been both professionally fulfilling and supportive. Starting as a junior lawyer, I was able to learn under the tutelage of best of the best, world-renowned lawyers who provided me access to many different working styles, encouraged me to develop my own and gave me the chance to run client relationships from a young age.

The firm has also offered me a number of important leadership roles over the years, including hiring, practice group and firm management as well as in diversity, pro bono and women's efforts. I have also been encouraged to pursue leadership opportunities outside the firm.

All of these experiences have significantly contributed to my growth and development as an attorney and individual.

It is this natural progression during the course of my career that has made it an easy decision for me to stay at my firm and which I believe is reflective of what many professionals want and need from their employers in the long term. ■

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