

Inclusion or Illusion? Determining if a Law Firm is Really Committed to Diversity

By Jitrine Bentsi-Enchill

Deciding where you'll work is a critically important decision. What should a lawyer look for when trying to determine a firm's commitment to diversity and inclusion? Here are some key things to look for during the interview and research process.

Commitment at the top: In order for diversity initiatives to succeed, there must be vigorous support from the senior level of the organization. Ask if there is a diversity task force or committee. Find out who is on it. Is it comprised only of minority and women lawyers? Keep in mind that partners are the change agents of a firm. Committees formed to address issues of diversity, recruitment and retention must be led by key leaders within a firm. Without the necessary foundation and leadership, efforts to build a diverse team will be ineffective.

Do your homework and don't be afraid to ask questions.

A diversity plan: Firms committed to inclusion and diversity have taken the time to carefully plan their diversity goals and objectives. They've also spent time creating a mission statement and guiding principals. Inquire about the firm's diversity mission statement or philosophy around inclusiveness.

Diversity goals and objectives included in the firm's strategic plan: Many firms fail to include diversity goals in the firm's overall vision and plan for growth and development. Firms successful in building a diverse workforce have implemented specific strategies for hiring, retention, professional development, communication, promotion, and mentoring. Many firms have taken the additional step of linking diversity goals to compensation and bonuses. Ask about the firm's long-term diversity goals and objectives.

Commitment to diversity training and development: Building awareness and alliances through diversity training is critical

to creating a productive, diverse, and inclusive workforce. Staff must have the opportunity to explore misconceptions about issues of inclusiveness, race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and individuals with physical challenges. Without linking training and development to firm-wide diversity objectives, a firm cannot successfully build an inclusive and diverse organization.

What's the bottom line? Do your homework and don't be afraid to ask questions. Keep in mind that the interview process is a two way street. The firm is assessing your level of competence and you also need to determine the firm's commitment and ability to sustain itself in the future.

The changing demographics in the U.S. and throughout the world will require firms to be prepared to meet the needs of a diverse and global client base. Firms committed to building inclusive work environments will go much further in successfully competing in today's

global economy. Choose wisely.



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