

Law Firms Reflect Greater Demand for Diverse Work Force

BY MARK LARSON

As the global economy develops, big corporations are increasingly looking for their suppliers and contractors to reflect the diversity of their customer bases.

And while that demand has extended to the legal profession from big clients needing their services, diversity in law firms — a level of women and minority partners on par with white males, for example — has a long way to go.

Still, in recent years, the presence of women and minorities in the legal profession has been growing.

Survey Snapshot

A Lawyers Club of San Diego 2008 Equality Survey found the following firms with local offices to be the most diverse with the highest number of minority attorneys: Jones Day, 88 percent; Foley & Lardner, 82 percent; **Wilson Petty Kosmo & Turner**, 32 percent; Fagen Friedman & Fulfroost, 31 percent; Baker & McKenzie, 21 percent; McKenna, Long & Aldridge, 20 percent; Fish & Richardson, 18 percent; Littler Mendelson, 18 percent; and Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati, 18 percent.

Wilson Petty is one of the largest women-owned law firms in the region, with women comprising 60 percent of its lawyers. In addition, 60 percent of its partners are women and nearly 15 percent of the partners are women of color. Female attorneys comprise 25 percent of Jones Day staff and 22 percent of Foley & Lardner's staff, according to the survey.

The Lawyers Club has conducted such surveys in the last couple of years in an effort to spot trends, says Nadia Bermudez, president of the club.

“For women of color, the attrition rate at large law firms is very high,” she says. “It’s important that we start tracking this. We find that most firms are receptive to responding to the survey. Some are not.”

The whole idea, she says, is to put women and minorities on equal footing with white men in law firms.

“What we’re seeking is parity,” she says. “The number of women graduating from law school is reaching parity.”

The survey by the Lawyers Club parses the data on women at law firms to determine how many are partners. For example, a firm could have women lawyers but have mostly male partners. She wishes similar surveys were taken in other cities nationwide for a larger snapshot.

But minorities are also underrepresented at most law firms.

“I think we have a long way to go,” says Bermudez. “Especially men and women of color.”

The overall goal is for the diversity within the legal profession to reflect that of the community it serves. She believes judges and lawyers need to have an understanding of a community’s culture and issues particular to women, and that more women and minority judges would help.

“California is one of the most diverse places on the planet,” says Bermudez. “It’s essential for the legal profession to reflect the state’s population.”

Open To Diversity

Vickie Turner is a partner at Wilson Petty Cosmo & Turner. Having the most women partners isn’t the goal of the firm, she says. Rather the firm tries to have the best attorneys in its practice areas, and those that fit into the firm’s culture.

And that translates to one thing: “We are receptive to diversity,” she says.

At the same time fostering such diversity works to serve a growing trend in the industry.

“Clients want (suppliers and contractors, including law firms) to be a reflection of the people who buy their products,” says Turner. “There’s more corporate interest in that in the last several years than there ever has been before.”

Beginning in 1999, companies like General Motors, Wal-Mart Stores, Ford Motor, ExxonMobil, DuPont and Shell Oil vowed to seek more diversity within their law firms. But the lack of progress in that call for change was cited in 2004 by Roderick Palmore, then-chief legal officer of Sara Lee.

Palmore issued a “Call to Action” which has been signed by more than 100 chief legal officers of major American corporations to seek firms with diverse legal staffs, as well as curtail or end relationships with firms showing no interest in staff diversity.

Two years ago, DuPont, General Motors, Sara Lee, Wal-Mart and Shell Oil agreed to collectively place \$16 million in business with women-owned law firms.

But with the economic turmoil of the day, Turner figures the trend for more diversity in this area may decrease. And while the numbers of women and minorities in law firms

have increased in recent years, Turner doesn't think enough of them have partner positions.

"Progress is at a snail's pace," says Turner. "That's how I perceive it."

Emery Harlan is chairman of the board of Milwaukee-based National Association of Minority & Women Owned Law Firms.

He, too, thinks the progress toward more diversity has been slow. But he sees the firms that are already diverse as being in a unique position to get increasing amounts of business from large corporations wanting diverse firms to represent them. And he figures it will encourage women and minority lawyers to start their own firms.

He sees Wal-Mart and DuPont as the leaders in the trend.

"They systematically eliminate firms that have not bought into diversity," says Harlan. "It's kind of in its infancy stage."

It doesn't take long, he says, for a firm to adopt a culture that develops a diverse staff, only a commitment from the top.

"It's very easy to do," he says. "The leadership of a firm has to say, 'This is what we value,' and then put resources to make sure it happens."

Mark Larson is a freelance writer.