

## Feature Articles

# Success in Recruiting and Retaining Minority Attorneys Begins at the Top

By Buck Buchanan



Several years ago, my firm's Chief Executive Officer and I were on a conference call with a Senior Claims Executive of a major insurance company client discussing a survey that our firm had responded to at his request. In addition to seeking raw numbers of minority attorneys and staff employed at the firm, the survey sought detailed information about the advancement of minority attorneys within the firm. It also requested a breakdown of which minority attorneys were handling that client's files, and the amount of time spent by those attorneys handling that client's files in the prior year. The conference call took place after the client had the opportunity to review and digest information we had provided in response to the survey. The purpose of the call was to identify strategies to get more minority attorneys involved in handling that client's files, and to increase the amount of time spent by minority attorneys working on the files.

That particular client, and several of our other clients, have made the point that when they retain law firms to handle and try cases in regions where the demographics reflect significant percentages of minorities, those firms should seek to have their attorney populations at least somewhat reflect the demographics of those regions.

Prior to joining Marshall Dennehey Warner Coleman & Goggin in 1999, I worked as an Assistant District Attorney in a suburban Philadelphia District Attorney's Office; as Assistant General Counsel at a Philadelphia area based chemical company; and as a partner at two Philadelphia area civil defense litigation firms. Over those years, I never had a minority attorney as a colleague.

It became clear upon arriving at Marshall Dennehey that senior management had made the recruitment and retention of minority attorneys a high priority. If you take nothing else away from this article, you should know that it is my strong opinion (and that of many commentators) that law firms will have difficulty attracting and/or retaining minority attorneys unless the senior-most management of the firm makes it clear that doing so is a high priority.

A few years after joining the firm, I was honored to be asked to assume the role of hiring partner. I quickly realized

that the utilization of traditional methods of seeking candidates (ads in legal publications and/or other print media and online ads) were not resulting in our attracting a representative sample of law students or practicing attorneys from the standpoint of ethnicity. In fact, I was astounded by how few minority candidates I would typically see over a given time period, even when we were running plenty of ads for employment, and we were hiring plenty of attorneys.

My first suggestion is that law firms should seek to establish relationships with personnel in the career development/career placement offices at the law schools where your firm recruits and practices. This gives representatives of the firm the opportunity to educate law students and recent graduates about what type of law firm you are, and what type of candidates you wish to attract. We have found that once the career placement professionals become familiar with your firm, if the appropriate occasion arises where a law student or recent graduate is interested in a firm like yours, candidates will be referred to you. Members of career placement offices at law schools are under significant pressure to find jobs for students and alumni, and they welcome representatives of law firms and other organizations that can assist them.

Pursuant to those relationships, our firm partnered with two other litigation firms in Philadelphia on three occasions over three years to jointly sponsor a reception to which we invited minority law students from the six area law schools. Invitations were also sent to leaders of the Philadelphia Bar Association and to other bar leaders. Each of the sponsoring law firms had five to seven attorneys participating in the event, giving the law students in attendance the opportunity to meet professionals from each of the firms, and to learn about litigation-focused firms like ours.

While it is a changing demographic, we still find that the overwhelming majority of the minority candidates that we see are first-generation law students and lawyers. Often they, like this author during law school, have little idea about what law firms exist and what kind of work they do. Not having lawyers in the family or knowing lawyers personally, they often lack mentors to point them in the

right direction based upon the type of work they may be interested in doing. We find that even in this Internet world, many law students, diverse or not, are acutely aware of who the AmLaw 100 and 200 firms are, but they are not well-versed on local law firms with practice area(s) in which they may be interested.

The first year that we held the minority law reception, approximately 40 law students attended. In the second year, 74 law students attended. The third year, over 100 attended. Participating in this event placed our firm on the radar screen of many minority law students and attorneys who were not seeking to interview with us prior to then. I am not suggesting “if you build it they will come,” but I am suggesting that if there is a perception that a particular law firm or other employer has a sincere interest in recruiting minority candidates, and the firm makes strategic efforts to attract them, you will begin to see a more diverse candidate pool applying for positions at your firm.

Before and during my tenure as hiring partner, our firm has interviewed at minority job fairs. Participation in these job fairs is a good way to gauge “who is out there.” We have had mixed success with identifying candidates for employment at those venues. However, we believe it is important to continue to attend and participate in job fairs, and in other programs that provide an opportunity to interact with minority law students, in order to consistently illustrate the firm’s commitment to diversity.

All of the Philadelphia-area law schools—like many law schools nationally—have minority affinity groups within the law school, including those for Asian-Pacific law students, African-Americans, Latinos, etc. Finding a way to

interact with one or more of those organizations, by way of mentoring students or recent graduates, or by seeking an opportunity to address those groups, can be another rich source of opportunities to educate minority law students and recent graduates about your firm.

Over the past few years, we have routinely been interviewing more minority law students and attorney candidates, and the quality of the candidates we are seeing has increased markedly compared to just a few years ago. While we are not entirely satisfied with our success in attracting minority candidates, we have had more success than most, and as much success as any of the defense litigation firms with whom we compete. That is noteworthy when you consider that some of our offices are located in areas where there is a low minority population and, simply, few minority attorneys.

In order to succeed in increasing the number of minority attorneys at your firm or business, it must be a clear and definite priority of the firm’s senior management that doing so is important. If that is not the case, you will not succeed. If senior management does make this a priority and supports a consistent evaluation and re-evaluation of the firm’s pursuit of fair and realistic goals in this regard, it is very likely that you will succeed.

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## One Job, One Task—Diversity and Inclusion: A Q&A with Asker Saeed

By Mohamed Nabil Bakry



As law firms work to improve their diversity and inclusion initiatives, they’re faced with the challenge of deciding how best to accomplish this lofty goal. Historically large law firms relied on a combination of their human resources, recruiting, and professional development departments, along with a handful of partners and associates to drive the effort. But over the last 20 years, the large law firm market is taking a different approach; creating a dedicated diversity and inclusion department headed up by a senior level administrator. I recently met with **Asker A.**

**Saeed**, Director of Diversity and Inclusion at Fried, Frank, Harris, Shriver & Jacobson LLP. Asker has had a remarkable career working for large law firms, a Fortune 50 corporation’s legal department, and on the business side of that corporation, all the while driving the effort within those organizations for greater diversity and inclusion. In 2012, Asker joined Day Pitney LLP as the full-time Director of Diversity and Inclusion and in 2017 he became the Director of Diversity and Inclusion at Fried Frank. Asker’s experiences have had a unique impact on his approach to improving diversity and inclusion at a large law firm. For