The Business Case for Driving Diversity Across Legal Profession

By Christina Zabat-Fran

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Greater diversity holds the potential to do more than good. It also can help an enterprise do well—as in greater profits.

Indeed, diversity has become part of a new benchmark for long-term sustainability: More and more businesses must recruit and promote top minority and female candidates to stay competitive in today’s global marketplace.

But what about the law firms that represent those businesses?

The upper echelons of law firms look much the same as they did 50 years ago, despite the increasing number of female and minority law school graduates.

In fact, law consistently ranks as the least diverse profession in the nation, according to the 2016 Report on Diversity in U.S. Law Firms by the National Association for Law Placement.

The enduring image of an attorney as a middle-age white man is largely still true.

The corporate world, meanwhile, is the one place where the legal profession has become more inclusive. As the C-suite has become more representative.

But, as a famous superhero once said, with great power comes great responsibility.

And it’s not just the C-suite legal positions that have become more representative.

Many successful companies, including St. John’s, have sought to create more inclusiveness throughout the entire in-house legal department.

The collective diversity represents not only the highest aspirations of those companies, it also has the power to affect meaningful change throughout the legal profession.

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The evening of Feb. 15 saw top in-house lawyers from Los Angeles and Orange County come together for a special Counsel in Conversation event at the Orange County office of Greenberg Gross LLP, a leading business litigation firm that embraces diversity and inclusion. The event—which the law firm co-sponsored with UCI School of Law, Thurgood Marshall Bar Association of Orange County, and John M. Langston Bar Association of Los Angeles—featured Dean Erwin Chemerinsky of UCI Law.

He moderated a conversation among several top African-American lawyers: John Page, Chief Legal Officer of Golden State Foods; Shenecia Smith, Associate General Counsel of Children’s Hospital of Orange County; and Alayah Ionmol, a litigation partner in charge of hiring at the Los Angeles office of Greenberg Gross.

The conversation highlighted reasons for the lack of diversity at law firms. It also pointed out compelling reasons why—from a practical business standpoint—that that must change.

And the discussion produced various positive ways in which in-house counsel may use their power to bring about such change.

The discussion was not intended solely for the in-house legal professionals in attendance—it also was insightful for the private-practice lawyers. Female and minority lawyers, at both in-house legal departments and private firms, have transcended challenges in law school and the legal profession. One of the most inspiring messages was that meeting such challenges, like all challenges in life, can make us stronger, both individually and collectively.

There is no doubt that the legal profession has not sufficiently recruited or promoted top minorities and women to the upper echelons of law firms. It also pointed out compelling reasons why—that that must change.

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Indeed, diversity has become part of a new benchmark for profits. It also can help an enterprise do well—as in greater transformative change—is just one step toward changing our profession to better serve our increasingly diverse business community.