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The Business Case for Driving Diversity Across Legal Profession



By Christina Zabat-Fran

Vice President, General Counsel, and Corporate Secretary of St. John Knits, founder of Counsel in Conversation, Winner of Rising Star Award at Orange County Business Journal's 2016 General Counsel Awards

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 diverse, so have those occupying the role of general counsel.

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

Many successful companies, including St. John, 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.

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

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; Sheniece Smith, Associate General Counsel of Children's Hospital of Orange County; and Aluyah Imoisili, 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 great detriment of not just members of those groups but the business community we serve.

We brought together this exceptional group of attorneys from throughout Southern California to embolden our collective strength and to strategize on ways in which we can better ensure that representative lawyers have the opportunities that they deserve.

The evening—which celebrated the significant role corporate counsel have and will continue to play in fostering positive, transformative change—is just one step toward changing our profession to better serve our increasingly diverse business community.

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