



Fenwick Study Charts Paths To Diversity

By Samuel Howard

January 19, 2010

Law360, New York (January 19, 2010) -- Active mentoring, resolute outreach and less doctrinaire approaches to recruitment are among the initiatives that have helped a select group of leading law firms establish some of the most diverse offices in the legal industry, according to a new study commissioned by Fenwick & West LLP.

Taking a close look at the California offices that lead the nation in the percentage of minority attorneys, the new survey offers a rare insight to how firms accomplished their objectives and continue to diversify their ranks while enhancing the quality of their practice.

The study illuminates how the leading firms have recruited and retained black, Hispanic, Asian, gay and bisexual, and female attorneys at the associate and partner levels in California.

The firms featured include Fenwick & West LLP, Bingham McCutchen LLP, Littler Mendelson PC, Morrison Foerster LLP, Orrick Herrington & Sutcliffe LLP, Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman LLP and Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati PC.

Felix Lee, a partner at Fenwick, said the firm commissioned the diversity study to burrow beneath superficial head counts and pin down the specific measures that have worked best, providing an example for other law firms looking to replicate those successes.

“Fenwick has been a leader in the area of diversity for a long time, and the study is part of the firm’s continued efforts to advance that cause,” Lee said. “The study revealed not only the different approaches the firms have taken to achieving diversity but also drove home the fact that they all work continually to make improvements.”

Lee stressed the business advantages of attracting and retaining a wider pool of talent, noting that clients increasingly demand a diverse background among a firm’s attorneys.

With minorities making up 36 percent of its California attorneys, Fenwick surpasses other firms handily, where nationwide just 12 percent of the major law firms' attorneys are from minority backgrounds, according to the study.

Bingham McCutchen topped the list as a magnet for black attorneys and pointed out the value in looking beyond grades and the limited roster of law schools, having put in place a recruiting program at Howard University School of Law.

Littler Mendelson has long led the field in promoting women partners, Morrison & Foerster has distinguished itself for the number of its GLBT and Hispanic attorneys, and Orrick boasts a high percentage of Asian lawyers, but it's important to note that all the standout figures are the fruit of long-running and deliberate efforts.

"It you want to make serious inroads in diversifying the workforce, a long-term commitment needs to be made," Lee said. "It really has to be ingrained in the culture of the firm and central to the firm's pursuit of excellence."

Lee noted that firms' willingness to put aside competitive interests and share their hiring and recruitment approaches in the study underscores the vested interest the legal profession has in opening up its ranks to the most talented individuals available.

Fenwick & West underwrote the study, which was conducted by an independent third party, Talent Advisory Board Inc.

Source: Law360