

These Law Firms Are Diverse. Here's How They Got That Way.

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Whether law firms are considered diverse places depends largely on one's perspective. As compared to the way they looked 40 years ago (or even 20 years ago), one might be tempted to say yes, they're diverse. But when percentages are compared to U.S. society at large, one might argue there's still a long way to go.

Nevertheless, not all firms are made alike. Some have increased the percentages of their lawyer staff who are women, African-American, Asian, Hispanic and gays and lesbians more than others.

On Monday, the [results of a project on law-firm diversity](#) were unveiled. The goal of the project, which was largely underwritten by Fenwick & West, was to take a look at the efforts of seven firms, mostly based in the Bay Area, that have made significant strides in recent years in becoming more diverse in one way or another. The firms examined: Bingham McCutchen, Fenwick, Littler Mendelson, Morrison & Foerster, Orrick, Pillsbury Winthrop and Wilson Sonsini.

It's an interesting report. Six percent of the lawyers at Bingham, for instance, are African-American, twice the San Francisco major law firm average. How'd it get that way? The report reads:

Although measuring progress is important, [African-American partner Ray] Marshall believes that looking beyond the numbers is critical when recruiting candidates. In 2006, Marshall co-authored an article in *The Recorder* . . . [stating] that while grades may play an important role in hiring decisions, they don't guarantee or define success once an attorney is employed." He states that the firm looked beyond the grades even back when he graduated from Harvard Law. In fact the firm has informally evaluated the traits of people who have become successful partners at the firm. Some of the traits that they identified as important beyond academic achievement, include interpersonal and communications skills.

The percentage of Hispanic attorneys at Morrison & Foerster is significantly higher than the estimated percentages for other firms in San Francisco. How come? Partly, it seems, because lawyers can move up at MoFo without having to worry too much about business development early on:

Arturo Gonzalez and Dorothy Fernandez . . . believe the ability to advance as a junior partner mitigates the need to develop business through external relationships early in one's career, allowing time to build a reputation internally and externally.

Among the others, Wilson Sonsini credits its high percentage of minority partners to its relative youth. Fenwick has worked hard to recruit minorities out of law school. Littler has offered a variety of career tracks which has apparently appealed to women.

What's common across the board, it seems, is that each of these firms have made diversity a priority, and recognized that it takes more than talk to change the makeup of an organization. They've all worked at it.

Source: Wall Street Journal