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3 reasons why your law firm needs to care about diversity + inclusion

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Losing your diverse talent early in their careers makes it harder to attain diversity in the partnership ranks and leadership, which in turn makes it more difficult to retain young diverse talent.

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By Molly Werhan – Kegler Brown Hill + Ritter
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Everyone generally accepts the proposition today that diversity + inclusion in the workplace is a laudable and worthwhile objective - at least in the abstract. But when the rubber meets the road - when D+I initiatives require significant investment or buy-in from leadership - sometimes D+I leaders are required to justify those requests.

This is often especially true for law firms where, instead of a top-down management structure, there is a more horizontal power dynamic with several decision makers involved. However, diversity + inclusion in the workplace is particularly worthwhile for law firms - for three very tangible reasons.

1. Diversity + inclusion is important to our clients

The legal profession generally, and law firms in particular, are notoriously slow to change, and their approach to D+I is no different. But the business world has long recognized the value of D+I, giving these initiatives high priority for years now.

As a recent example, in January 2019, more than 170 general counsels and chief legal officers of companies that collectively spend hundreds of millions of dollars annually on legal services (including two Ohio-based companies: [Flynn Restaurant Group](#) and [TRANZACT](#)), signed an [open letter to law firms](#) demanding that their outside law firms “reflect the diversity of the legal community and the companies and the customers [they] serve.”

2. The high cost of attrition

As that letter points out, many of the law firms that have had success recruiting diverse talent into their associate classes still continue to promote all or nearly all white, male partner classes. This is an indication that their D+I programs do not go deep enough to effectively retain diverse talent. This is an important issue for law firms because attrition costs employers money, a lot of money: losing one associate can [cost](#) a firm between \$200,000 to \$500,000.

Further, losing your diverse talent early in their careers makes it harder to attain diversity in the partnership ranks and leadership, which in turn makes it more difficult to retain young diverse talent. Associates need to see (not just be told) that people who look like them can be, and are, successful.

High turnover in general has a negative impact on employee morale, but when the losses are predominantly concentrated within the diverse workforce, it raises serious and fundamental questions about the employer’s approach to D+I, especially for the remaining diverse employees.

3. Greater creativity, innovation + productivity

Finally, diversity in the workplace boosts [creativity](#) and [drives innovation](#). This is not only because diverse teams bring different ideas, perspectives, and experiences together, having richer and more productive brainstorming sessions - and [making better decisions](#) - but also because simply having a diverse workforce changes the way that people in that environment [think and behave](#).

Inclusion in the workplace is critical, as people thrive and do their best work in an environment where they can bring their full, authentic selves, and employees are most productive in a workplace where they feel valued and have a sense of belonging. Put simply, companies with a diverse workforce [outperform](#) their peers and [are more profitable](#).

Diversity + inclusion is critical to any successful business or productive workplace for a multitude of reasons, many of which are tangible and concrete. The examples described above are principally significant drivers in the world of private practice, but they are certainly not exclusive to it. So, if you’re needing an extra boost to get your D+I proposals across the finish line, I hope you can pull some of these aces from your sleeve.

Learn more about diversity and inclusion efforts at Kegler Brown Hill + Ritter.

Molly Werhan is a business attorney who focuses her practice in the areas of franchising and M+A. She also serves as co-chair of Kegler Brown’s Diversity + Inclusion Committee, which seeks to create an environment that reflects the diversity of culture, thought, and background of our communities.

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