

Columbus law firms create diversity, hire by hire

Two years into a historic public commitment to increase the racial diversity of Columbus law firms, the number of minority attorneys has almost doubled, and 22 percent of the attorneys hired in 2002 were attorneys of color, the Columbus Bar reports today.

Increases in minority lawyers are seen at every level, from the number of minority law partners to the incoming class of summer law interns - considered an important measure of the pipeline for future new hires.

"Two years ago we declared publicly that the imbalance of diversity in Columbus law firms was as philosophically odious as it is business adverse, and we have followed up with committed action to recruit, retain, and promote minority attorneys," said David Patterson, President of the Columbus Bar. "This year's survey shows we are learning what it takes to increase the racial diversity of our ranks, and have made encouraging progress in this early stage of our program."

The results are included in an annual diversity survey conducted by the Columbus Bar as part of its Managing Partners' Diversity Initiative. The effort is a unique collaboration joined by twenty-two Columbus law firms, the John Mercer Langston Bar Association - comprised primarily of African American attorneys - The Ohio State University Mortiz College of Law and Capital University Law School, in addition to the Columbus Bar.

The participating firms range in size from more than 200 employees to at least 15. According to the survey:

- Since 2000, the number of minority attorneys has almost doubled, beginning at 46 to the current 77 (from 3.71 percent to 5.59 percent).
- While the number of all attorneys has grown 11 percent since 2000 (140 attorneys), the number of minority attorneys has grown 67 percent (31 attorneys).
- That means 22 percent of the 140 attorneys hired in 2002 were attorneys of color (defined as African American, Hispanic, American Indian and Alaskan, or Asian and Pacific Islander).
- Comparing progress from 2000 to 2003, minority partners have increased from 13 to 25 and associates from 31 to 47.
- The pipeline to maintain the progress has been primed with minority summer associates. The number has doubled, going from 19 in 2001 to 38 in 2002.

"The changes we are making in our firms to recruit, retain and promote minority talent make the entire organization smarter, healthier and a better place to work for all attorneys," said Rich Simpson, Managing Partner at Bricker & Eckler, and Chair of the Diversity Initiative Advisory Board. "Our efforts so far have created positive results, but we have much more work to do, and we are committed to doing it."

The diversity plan was spurred in part by a 2000 survey that showed of 1,237 attorneys in participating firms, only 2 percent were African American, and less than 1 percent were other minorities. The resulting initiative committed each of the participating firms to specific action steps designed to recruit, hire, train, retain and promote minority attorneys, and create an environment conducive to success.

While each firm develops programs that meet their own specific management structures and cultures, some of the common successful strategies for small, medium and large firms this year were:

- Sharpening recruiting efforts to include historically minority institutions;
- Reevaluating hiring criteria to make sure it doesn't exclude talented minority lawyers whose promise might be reflected in other ways beyond simple comparisons by the numbers;
- Changing corporate culture through ongoing sensitivity training and other programs for managing partners on down;
- Appointing a diversity coordinator;
- Communicating a commitment to diversity in websites and marketing materials;
- Developing mentoring programs that bridge generational as well as racial and cultural gaps;
- Adding winter internships as well as summer internships, allowing more time to build relationships with law students; and
- Increasing 'lateral hires' - lawyers already in practice in other sectors.

In a related collaboration, this year the Columbus Bar produced the first joint recruiting brochure between Capital University Law School and The Ohio State University Moritz College of Law, to attract minority law students to Columbus.

"In a competitive environment, in a diverse country, in a global economy, law firms must seek to reflect the face of the clients we serve. It has always been the right thing to do - now it is a business as well as a cultural imperative," Patterson said.

The Columbus Bar's effort is seen as a model program across the country, and is being considered by several other bar associations. Participants in the Managing Partners' Diversity Initiative are: Arter & Hadden, Baker & Hostetler, Benesch Friedlander Coplan & Aronoff, Blaugrund Herbert & Martin, Bricker & Eckler, Buckingham Doolittle & Burroughs, Carlile Patchen & Murphy, Chester Willcox & Saxbe, Crabbe Brown & James, Isaac Brant Ledman & Teetor, Jones Day, Kegler Brown Hill & Ritter, Lane Alton & Horst, Luper Neidenthal & Logan, Maguire & Schneider, Porter Wright Morris & Arthur, Schottenstein Zox & Dunn, Squire Sanders & Dempsey, Thompson Hine, Vorys Sater Seymour and Pease, Wiles Boyle Burkholder & Bringardner and Zeiger & Carpenter. Additional participants include: Capital University Law School, The Ohio State University Moritz College of Law and John Mercer Langston Bar Association.