

Friday, February 29, 2008

Times are changing as diversity in the workplace gets better

South Florida Business Journal - by [Ed Duggan](#)

Diversity in the workplace has come naturally to the K&L Gates law firm, which has 1,500 employees in 25 offices on three continents.

In its Miami office, alone, there is an attorney in a wheelchair, openly gay and lesbian attorneys, working mothers, Hispanics, blacks and Asians across a wide range of ages, generations and cultures.

What these employees all have in common is excellence, according to Dan Casey, the firm's local administrative partner.

"Our goal as a firm is to find the best lawyers, paralegals and support staff we can find," he said, adding that the firm actively recruits candidates wherever they can be found and prides itself on its diversity. "We reach out to those who are talented and diverse."

The firm recruits in predominantly African-American law schools, diverse social organizations and multi-ethnic networking groups - all in search of the best diverse talent available.

K&L Gates' Miami office employs 30 lawyers, plus about 40 paralegals and other support staff. The full-service firm specializes in litigation, transactional and regulatory law, with an emphasis on dispute resolution and business transaction work.

"We recruit in-house, as well as through headhunters, as the legal market is very competitive in South Florida," Casey said. "We even have a cabinet-level executive, called the chief diversity officer, who is headquartered in Washington, D.C."

Dynamic and evolving

For **Protech** CEO Deborah Vazquez, diversity makes the United States dynamic and evolving.

"Our country was formed and built on diversity," she said. "There are untold studies that document how diversity in the workforce enhances how companies operate and succeed within their communities. We see it in operation daily."

Vazquez not only believes it, she lives it at her technology placement and hiring firm. As a hired gun for recruiting, she also is ground zero for diversity best practices in hiring. At times, she says she is working against established prejudices, old patterns and indifference, but most of that is changing by law, custom and the profit incentive.

For instance, software teams are frequently heavily weighted with men, as technology training has historically attracted more men than women. That is changing from the top down.

"Clients frequently ask that we be sure to include well-qualified minority and women candidates, and, of course, we are always searching and reaching out for the most talented people regardless of their origins," Vazquez said.

If a client wants to exclude a group of people, Vazquez will explain the legal pitfalls and refuse the client if he can't see the necessity for diversity compliance.

Fortunately, that seldom happens, she notes, adding that modern employers seem to welcome diversity as long as job candidates possess good communication skills for interaction with other employees, management and customers.

Direct result of diversity

John Pepper, the former CEO of Procter & Gamble (NYSE: PG), said the company's success was a direct result of its diverse and talented workforce.

In a Best Practices in Achieving Workforce Diversity white paper, he wrote: "Our ability to develop new consumer insights and ideas and to execute in a superior way across the world is the best possible testimony to the power of diversity any organization could ever have."

Just the term diversity can mean a little or a lot, depending on the background, mindset and upbringing of an individual.

"Different people think about diversity very differently: Race, gender, religion and nationality are typically mentioned by almost everyone, but age, sexual orientation, education and work experience are also diversity factors we run into on a practical level," Vazquez said.

Startup firms are often more receptive to a diverse culture than older, established firms, but even that is changing, as companies see the practical results of a diverse workforce all around them.

It isn't enough for a firm to be diverse, experts say. It must also offer equal rewards and opportunities within its diversity, as well as evolve its best diversity practices.

Attorney Gregory Haile is with the Fort Lauderdale office of Berger Singerman, a firm dedicated to company and client diversity, as well as a strong recruiting outreach.

It has 20 lawyers in its four main practices areas - administrative law, business reorganization, dispute resolution and transactions.

Haile, a member of the firm's dispute resolution team and an experienced litigator, also is president of the T.J. Reddick Bar Association, an organization dedicated to promoting the professional excellence of black lawyers in Broward County, increasing the enrollment of minority students in college and law school, and promoting the general welfare of all of Broward County's citizens.

"Before I joined Berger Singerman, I spoke to about 20 past and present lawyers with the firm," Haile said. "I especially like to talk to previous employees. I heard universal praise for the firm, extolling its interest and support of employees' extracurricular activities."

As a bar association executive, he frequently devotes as much as 35 to 40 hours a month to the organization and its activities.

"It's a key thing to have a firm's respect and support for the outreach activities," he said. "I'm also active with the Young Lawyers Group, as well as the Hispanic, Cuban-American and Caribbean bar associations. We learn from each other."

Haile says firms need to mentor diverse hires, while employees must also be assertive and ask questions.

"It's a two-way street," he said.

It might even be a three-way street, because potential clients have a say in the mix.

"More and more clients and potential clients are looking for diversity in their professional services," Haile said. "It is not unusual for companies to make it known that they are only interested in dealing with firms that are diverse [in their makeup]."

Best practices in diversity starts with the essential action of reaching out, but it doesn't end there for successful firms.

Recruiting means more than getting minority employees in the door; it also means retaining them.

"It doesn't happen by accident. That's where mentoring is so important," Haile said. "Minorities need to see a clear career path, do important, valuable work and have an opportunity to be heard. It's very important for management to ask for their opinions and thoughts, and that they have the opportunity to lead when ready."

Hispanic growth

At the end of 2007, the Bureau of Labor Statistics projected the number of Hispanics in the workforce would increase by 30 percent from 2006 to 2016. By then, that segment of the labor force will be about 27 million.

"Those numbers should tell employers that diversity is an important issue and they may want to create diversity committees or launch targeted diversity programs now," said Jeff Koc, a regional manager for recruitment and staffing firm Robert Half Technology who oversees tri-county offices in Fort Lauderdale, Coral Gables and West Palm Beach.

Koc said the IT industry is probably a bit ahead of other fields in this regard, as the high number of foreign-born workers on H1-B and other visas has given those in the IT field increased exposure to diverse teams.

Four generations

A notable development of the new century is the presence of four generations in today's workplace - often categorized as traditionalists, baby boomers, Generation X and Generation Y.

"According to demographers, sociologists and other experts who study cohorts within society, each generation has distinctive preferences, work styles and professional goals, and responds to different sets of motivators and rewards," Koc said. "Not surprisingly, this multigenerational workforce is also quite diverse."

Diversity, as Koc sees it, is not only desirable on its merits, but has important long-term benefits.

"Having a diverse workforce in today's business environment positions an organization to be an employer-of-choice, which is vital as the IT industry is currently experiencing a shortage of skilled professionals in many areas," he explained.

That diverse staff also reflects more closely the reality of customers, suppliers and partners. It brings new perspectives and dynamics to any debates or discussions, as well inspiring new and different ideas for ways of doing things.