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Diversity in a Downturn

The Future is in Partnerships

By Karen Russell

Despite the bumpy economy, don't dial back your diversity efforts. It's actually time to double down. As Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer recently observed: "We cannot let current economic challenges derail progress made on diversity efforts in the IT industry, legal profession or anywhere else. Diversity is critical to the success of our economy and to the advancement of our society. Workplaces that welcome different experiences, perspectives and capabilities and foster talent and creativity can be great engines of innovation — which is needed now, more than ever."

Microsoft is putting their money where their mouth is. Their general counsel, Brad Smith, asked outside law firms to work on inclusion, then sweetened the pot by making them eligible for a two percent quarterly or annual bonus based on achieving concrete diversity results.

Smith's own bonuses are tied to the success of the outside firms hitting their diversity goals. So both the client and firm have skin in the game. Microsoft is on the cutting edge of diversity, and I predict we will see more client bonus and recognition programs.

In addition to the enhanced innovation that diversity promotes, pure demographics will continue to fuel diversity efforts.

According to the most recent census, Multiracial-Americans are the fastest-growing demographic group, followed by Hispanic-Americans. Minority buying power is exploding. In 2008, The Selig Center for Economic Growth noted that both the Hispanic market (\$951 billion) and the African-American market (\$913 billion) are larger than all but 13 countries (2007 GDP in U.S. dollars). That's a lot of potential clients.

As the market, your customers and your clients become more diverse, is your team poised to service them? Are you putting the appropriately inclusive foot forward?

First, assess your mentoring program. Whether through a formal program, launching affinity groups or just hosting brown bag discussions, find ways to promote mentoring in your organization. My firm did a survey and discovered that having an effective mentor was key to becoming a successful attorney and making partner. We have several mentors: practice group mentors, peer mentors, partnership mentors and diversity mentors. However, we had a challenge with our diversity mentors because we lacked diversity, so we forged a mentoring partnership with our client Microsoft. Now, some of their diverse lawyers mentor our associates.

Next, consider forging a partnership with a diverse trade group or with a client. Another client of ours has spent the past year meeting with each diverse bar association in their area, so that when they are poised to hire, they will have relationships with a group that can refer them top talent of multicultural origins.

In Seattle, where I live, there's a lot of enthusiasm about partnering with local pipeline programs connecting to high school and college students. That way you can share resources and work with local experts who already know pipeline best practices.

We've also found that our staff and attorneys want to spend time giving back to their community by mentoring students of all levels. The students are hungry to learn, and attorneys are eager to share their skills by coaching the next generation of legal professionals.



Karen Russell is a Harvard-trained attorney and diversity consultant at Davis Wright Tremaine, where she serves as firm-wide manager of diversity initiatives. She is the proud daughter of NBA legend Bill Russell and incorporates his team management principles in her leadership and inclusion training.