**Increasing Diversity in Outside Counsel Hiring**

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While the business world continues to recognize the increased effectiveness of diverse teams, it’s no secret that law firms continue to struggle with recruiting, promoting, and retaining diversity within their ranks. Considering that, according to a 2017 National Association of Women Lawyers report, only 6% of equity partners in U.S. law firms are minorities and 19% percent are women, in-house lawyers face a consistent challenge in hiring outside counsel who align with their company’s internal diversity initiatives. In-house lawyers should consider the following strategies to increase the diversity of their outside counsel.

Check the track record: Although law firms as a whole have diversity issues, some firms perform demonstrably better than most in diversity measures. Organizations like the National Association of Women Lawyers, the Human Rights Campaign, and the National Association for Legal Placement regularly evaluate and reward law firm diversity and inclusion efforts. Check how outside counsel has scored on the Human Rights Campaign’s Corporate Equality Index, the Women in Law Empowerment Forum’s Gold Standard Certification initiative, and The American Lawyer’s Diversity Scorecard. Locally, the Portland Business Journal annually ranks the most diverse law firms in Portland. While these are just a few of the most-recognized measures of law firm diversity, in-house counsel will find that a handful of firms are consistent leaders in workplace inclusion and diversity, while others rarely make the cut.

Reward innovation: Several organizations have taken the lead in developing and implementing effective diversity programs for law firms, with considerable success. For example, Holland & Knight, along with a group of 44 firms, has partnered with Diversity Lab to implement a program—named the Mansfield Rule after the NFL’s Rooney Rule—requiring it to consider women and minority attorneys for at least 30% of its candidate pool for leadership roles, equity partner promotions and lateral hires. But hiring law firms that support innovative diversity initiatives is not enough; in-house counsel should also communicate to firms that these programs impact where outside counsel dollars are spent.

Build relationships with local affinity bar organizations: In-house counsel face heightened obstacles in hiring diverse lawyers in Oregon, a state with a historical lack of diversity in its bar. But several local legal organizations focus on promoting and supporting an inclusive Oregon bar, including the Oregon Asian Pacific American Bar Association, the LGBT Bar Association of Oregon (OGALLA), the Oregon Hispanic Bar Association, and the Oregon Minority Lawyers Association, among others. Consider opportunities to build relationships with these specialty bar associations by becoming a member, attending events, volunteering to speak on a panel, and inviting their leaders to lunch.

Go beyond the pitch team: Most law firms have learned that it is important to present diverse teams for client pitches, but inclusion at the pitch stage does not always mean that the team doing the work (and getting the credit) is similarly diverse. In-house counsel have considerable power in insisting that diverse lawyers are named relationship partners and that origination credit is awarded in a manner reflecting the contributions of diverse lawyers. If it is unclear how much work, or how credit for work, is being allocated, ask. By ensuring that quality work and credit are properly allocated to diverse lawyers, in-house lawyers can influence compensation and leadership decisions at law firms, which helps the promotion and retention of diverse lawyers.

By employing these strategies, in-house counsel can both meaningfully increase the diversity of their outside lawyers and help foster a more inclusive and diverse legal profession. Further information on the diversity programs and measures mentioned in this article can be found at: <http://www.diversitylab.com/pilot-projects/mansfield-rule/>; <http://www.hrc.org/campaigns/corporate-equality-index>; <https://wileftribune.com/gold-standard-news/44-firms-receive-wilefs-gold-standard-certification/>; <https://www.nalp.org/uploads/2017NALPReportonDiversityinUSLawFirms.pdf>; and <http://www.nawl.org/p/cm/ld/fid=1163>.