

Seven Innovative Programs for Law Firms That Advance DEIB Principles

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Summary

- Despite the federal government's opposition to DEIB programs and corporations abandoning them, law firms can reaffirm their commitment to DEIB principles through innovative initiatives.
- These activities are often already underway at law firms and may simply tap diverse attorneys for new opportunities at no cost.
- Individuals may also support these initiatives by highlighting the contributions of their peers and diverse attorneys.

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In the wake of a federal administration actively opposed to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) initiatives, law firms may pause their existing DEIB programs. Moreover, with corporations pulling back on their commitments to such efforts, firms may be leery of touting programs that some of their clients do not support.

However, law firms, which have a history of being exclusionary and under-representative of diversity, need not hold back from their efforts to recruit professionals of diverse backgrounds, promote the insights and achievements of diverse colleagues, and train partners and employees of diverse backgrounds for leadership roles.

Following are seven programs that firms may undertake at no or minimal expense as they reaffirm their commitment to DEIB.

1. Identify Diverse Attorneys as Sources for Reporters

Journalists at industry and business publications frequently contact attorneys for insights on timely issues. Accordingly, news articles are a springboard for prospective clients, lapsed clients, and referral sources to learn about changes in legislation and regulation that affect operations.

Being quoted in the news will raise the profile of individual attorneys and the firm itself. However, a reporter will not contact an attorney spontaneously unless they know of the lawyer's authoritative perspective on a specific topic — hence the need for firms to formally introduce diverse attorneys to the media and simultaneously provide training for them to engage in interviews with journalists.

Topics for news stories include the initial filing of litigation, recent transactions, and pending federal investigations, among other subjects.

2. Promote Diverse Attorneys as Conference Panelists and Moderators

Man-els is the derisive term for conference panels composed entirely of (usually white) male speakers. Firms should survey the schedule of industry events attended by clients and referral sources to identify relevant conferences where diverse attorneys may address the state of the law in a given sector.

Similar to the introduction to reporters, contacting conference organizers opens the door to a highly visible presence before a target audience. Panel presentations spotlight the speakers and their firms as excellent observers of the industry. When moderated by a reporter, they are opportunities to develop a relationship with that journalist.

Firms that organize their own events have an expansive moment to feature multiple attorneys as speakers. Including a diverse client or referral source who corroborates the value of the attorneys' wise counsel leads to attendees identifying with the panelist. It also sets the stage for future engagement with the attorneys and the firm.

3. Select Diverse Attorneys for Awards

Whether it is a metropolitan business association or publication, a professional membership organization, or another group, there are annual industry and local awards for excellence and achievement. Examples include 40 Under 40, recognition for innovation, and appreciation for community service. There may even be narrowly focused categories, such as Leading Women in Insurance or Rising Stars in Healthcare.

The award process usually involves interviews with industry executives evaluating the candidates. The presentation of the award at a lunch or dinner to honor the awardees is a powerful opportunity for networking, not to mention the publicity promoting the event itself. Award programs sponsored by metropolitan business publications afford the added benefit of being featured in a prestigious magazine widely read by executives. Once named as an award recipient, the attorney may serve on the following year's selection committee, another prime networking venue.

4. Build Relationships with Diverse Law Student Groups

In the screening process for summer associates, include candidates from diverse backgrounds, without setting a specific goal or quota. Provide formal training and informal gatherings for them to engage with appropriate mentors during their summer experience.

Plan to speak on panels and sponsor programs at the student affinity groups of local and regional law schools. These are low-cost events and build a pipeline for summer associates and future hires. A pair of attorneys, one diverse and one alum, may offer perspectives on an industry or legal issue, perhaps highlighting a recent client success. They may also share the firm's DEIB activities and achievements.

5. Hire Vendors of Diverse Backgrounds

Review the contracts the firm maintains with service providers and consultants, with an eye on their expiration dates. In anticipation of their renewal, invite competitors who are certified as minority-owned or women-owned businesses to speak with the firm about your needs and their services. The firm can elect to engage with diverse business owners who provide comparable services.



6. Ensure Firm Leadership Reflects Diversity

There are multiple components to [Mansfield Certification](#), a year-long “structured certification process designed to ensure all talent at participating law firms and legal departments has a fair and equal opportunity to advance into leadership,” developed by Diversity Lab. The process has specific requirements, including, for example, that the selection of candidates for promotion to law firm leadership be comprised of at least 30% members of groups that have historically been underrepresented.

7. Establish Employee Resource and Affinity Groups and Promote Their Activities

Informal networks of diverse employees already exist within the law firm. Create *formal employee resource and affinity groups*, led by a senior partner together with a midlevel associate (or senior staff member). Leaders and members will generate topics and suggestions of speakers. Provide a budget for programs, including group-specific and firm-wide events of related holidays or celebrations. Assign billable time credit to the leaders (and participants). Ensure that the events are promoted in advance and takeaways are summarized in the firm's internal newsletter or communiqués.

These activities will promote an atmosphere of community among the cohorts' members (e.g., parents of young children, shared ethnic backgrounds, veterans, or children of aging parents). The two-tiered leadership will underscore the significance of the group within the firm's culture, as well as cultivate associates for future senior roles. Attendance by other members of the firm promotes greater understanding and awareness of the culture and issues of the affinity groups.

Individuals and the Firm

This discussion has necessarily focused on law firm management, which builds the culture and the budget. Nonetheless, there remains a vital role for individual attorneys and even employees. Certainly, lawyers may pursue several of these initiatives for themselves and on behalf of their colleagues. Partners who are identified for press interviews, speaking engagements, and awards may suggest that a diverse colleague be considered for the opportunity. Attorneys may self-nominate and indicate their interest in these three activities.

There's ample occasion for any lawyer at the firm to cultivate a relationship with a diverse student group at a law school as an alum or at a local school. Attorneys may also indicate their interest in participating in the hiring of summer associates to address the diversity among the pool of candidates.

Reaffirming a Commitment to DEIB

Law firms pursuing these seven activities will find they have budgeted for most of them already. Their public relations professionals are on the lookout for trends in the news, as well as keeping abreast of the firm's new litigation, pending transactions, and counsel during ongoing investigations. They will soon have a roster of diverse partners who may be introduced to reporters to comment on these specific topics.

Similarly, the selection process for attorneys to speak at conferences and be nominated for awards is scheduled annually by the marketing team. These colleagues need only *look beyond the usual suspects* and include diverse attorneys from each practice group when compiling their lists of candidates.

Vendor contracts with the same (or with new diverse) business owners are delineated in the annual budget. Expenses for participating in events held by area law schools and programming for employee resource groups are likely to run a modest tab for travel, catering, speaker fees, and related incidentals.

Leadership development among maturing attorneys is likely planned, certainly with new names added to the cohort to increase the participation of diverse partners on the executive committee and in senior roles.

Faced with a societal wind change, law firms should not suspend their DEIB activities. Firm management may continue to elevate their diverse attorneys and utilize the services of diverse

business suppliers, as well as engage with law school student affinity groups and summer associates of diverse backgrounds.

Incurring nominal additional expense, law firms are poised to quietly move forward with DEIB initiatives and reaffirm their commitment to DEIB to their partners, associates, and employees, as well as those clients and vendors who share their perspective, strengthening their community and society as a whole.

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