

How 5 Firms Are Building More Diverse Ranks

By Erin Coe

Law360, New York (August 20, 2017, 8:02 PM EDT) -- When litigator Juan Alcalá interviewed at Holland & Knight LLP in Miami last year, he couldn't believe what he heard.

As he walked by offices on the 29th and 31st floors of the international firm's downtown space, all he could hear were lawyers speaking Spanish. For a Hispanic attorney who had grown used to being one of the few Spanish-speakers at other firms for nearly two decades, the sound of the language filling the hallways was music to Alcalá's ears.

"I felt like I finally have a team; I finally belong," Alcalá recalled.

Alcalá joined the firm as a partner in its Austin, Texas, office in May 2016, focusing on litigation and international disputes.

"Here, I'm not just a token — the minority, the Spanish-speaker or the Latino partner," he said. "It's a good feeling to know you're part of a larger group."

While many law firms struggle to make significant strides to diversify their workforce, particularly in their upper echelons, Holland & Knight is part of a group that is bucking the trend, with each member adding a net of 20 minority attorneys or more in 2016, according to Law360's Diversity Snapshot.

Many of these firms are intentionally spending more time on recruitment, retention and mentoring initiatives aimed at minority attorneys, while at least one is finding that it is gaining more diverse talent when it focuses on ways to engage lawyers in general.

Firms like these also recognize that attracting and promoting a mix of lawyers from different backgrounds has business benefits that go beyond appealing to clients that are demanding diverse teams.

"Having a more diverse population and an appreciation of differences results in a more creative, flexible and nimble workforce," said Sandra Flow, a partner at Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton LLP who chairs its committee on diversity and inclusion.

Here's how five firms are making substantial progress on diversifying their ranks:

Polsinelli PC

When employment litigator Carmen Cole interviewed at Polsinelli this year, she already had three job offers, but Polsinelli's diversity agenda helped make the decision easy.

She was interested in a firm that took action — promoting female and minority attorneys to partner, offering them management and practice leader positions and assigning them substantive work tied to the firm's bottom line.

"Polsinelli was taking a lot of strides to not just talk the talk, but walk the walk," said Cole, an African-American attorney who joined the firm as a principal in May.

Polsinelli added 34 minority attorneys, including nine partners, in 2016, according to Law360 data.

But while Polsinelli hired many minority lawyers last year, its total minority attorney and minority partner levels of 13 percent and 7 percent, respectively, lagged behind industry averages of 14 percent and 9 percent, according to Law360 data.

Dan Cranshaw, Polsinelli's chief diversity officer, acknowledged that the firm's diversity efforts are a "work in progress."

"It's a journey we started years ago, and it's begun to escalate," he said. "We don't think we're done or that we're ever going to be done."

One of the biggest changes Polsinelli made last year is it hired J. Danielle Carr as its first director of diversity and inclusion. That move coincides with a 52 percent increase in the firm's minority attorney headcount in 2016 compared with the previous year, according to Law360 data.

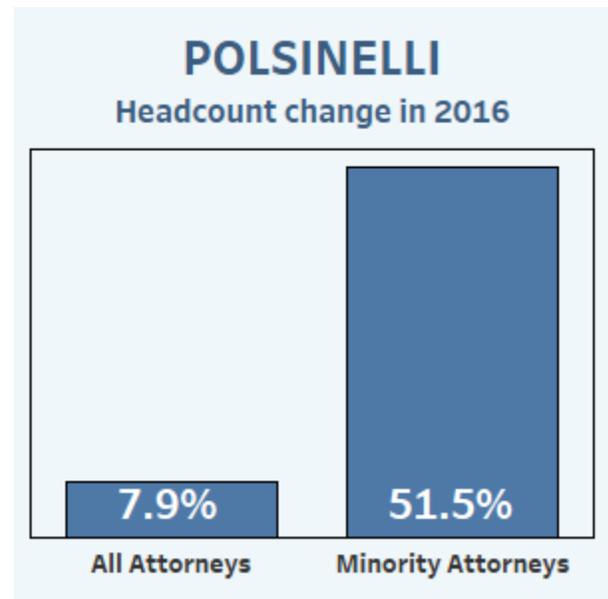
Carr and Cranshaw, along with the diversity and inclusion committee, developed a strategic plan that was approved by the executive board, and moving forward with a plan that comes from the top down shows "everybody is rowing in the same direction," Cranshaw said.

"We want to ensure that diversity does not become something extra or off to the side, but that it's within what we do," he said.

Hiring a full-time diversity director, rather than having an attorney juggle the role with billable hours, signaled to Cole that Polsinelli was investing in its future.

"There has to be buy-in from the senior-most executives of the firm for diversity to be taken seriously. Otherwise, it's just a club," Cole said.

Holland & Knight LLP



Seeking an edge in the war for talent, Holland & Knight has taken a “village approach” to recruiting, said Tiffani Lee, its firmwide diversity partner. This means that multiple attorneys work together to engage candidates — particularly diverse lawyers.

About three years ago, Lee convinced a talented African-American junior associate who wasn’t looking at Holland & Knight to consider the firm’s Tampa, Florida, office. Next, other Holland & Knight lawyers joined in the effort, with the head of the firm’s litigation section, that office’s executive partner and Lee’s managing partner also jumping in to help recruit the lawyer.

It was satisfying to see an attorney switch from “I’m not going to apply to Holland and Knight” to “I’m going to Holland & Knight,” Lee said, and the firm even received compliments from rivals unable to woo the candidate.

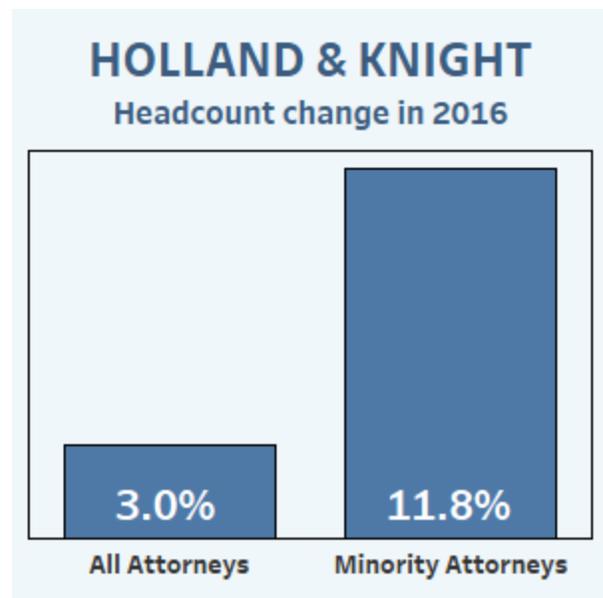
Holland & Knight is also among the firms that recently agreed to pilot the Mansfield Rule, a program requiring that at least 30 percent of candidates for firm leadership positions be women or minorities.

“If firms really want to improve, it requires some intentions, strategies and effort,” Lee said.

In 2016, the firm added 20 minority attorneys, including five partners, according to Law360 data.

This year, the firm also has become more proactive about reviewing lawyers’ productivity. Instead of looking at the data once or a few times a year, it is now looking at it on a monthly basis to see if it helps with overall retention.

“If you don’t pay attention regularly, you can be caught in a situation where a person goes out the door before the firm has a chance to address any issues,” Lee said.



Lewis Brisbois Bisgaard & Smith LLP

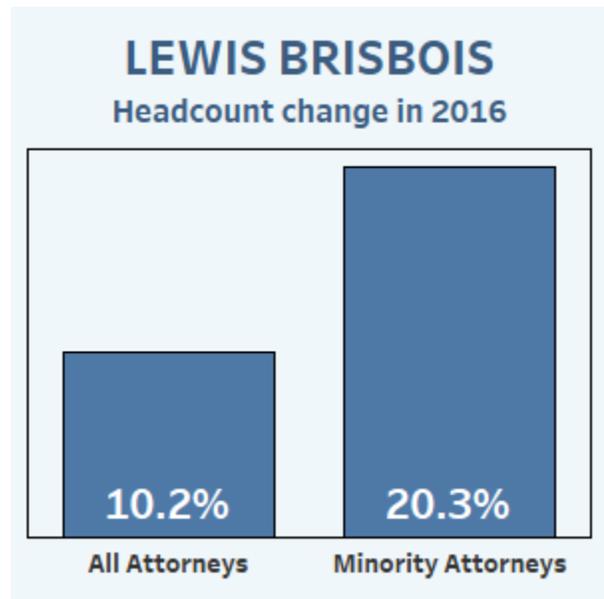
While some firms take a deliberate approach to diversity, Lewis Brisbois relies on a hiring method where it looks for attorneys with key expertise in a wide array of locales. Yet its diversity numbers stand well above industry norms.

The firm enlisted 50 minority attorneys, including 20 partners, to its team last year, according to Law360 data. Lewis Brisbois’ lawyer ranks consist of 26 percent minorities, surpassing the industry’s 14 percent average, and it has a partnership of 21 percent minorities, more than double the industry’s 9 percent average.

“We have a strategy of hiring the best lawyers available in each locale, and with that strategy, it inevitably leads to a cross-section of the local community,” said R. Gaylord Smith, a firm co-founder. “We have no specific strategies to hire any particular ethnic class.”

What Lewis Brisbois considers the “best attorney” depends on the expertise needed at the moment, he said. Sometimes, it’s the lawyer with strong technical skills while other times, it’s the rainmaker with a big book of business.

Law360 data shows Lewis Brisbois has more than 1,100 lawyers, and Smith said the firm's large size likely contributes to its diversity. Since many of its clients are major institutions seeking a range of expertise, the firm draws on a wide talent pool to match clients’ needs.



“I suppose a smaller firm may not have the same luxury to bring in a lot of talent in a lot of different cities ... and may not hire enough to get a fair spread,” Smith said. “The large amount of hiring we do allows us to have a better chance to reflect the communities in which we work.”

The firm also encourages attorneys to work as a team rather than as individual silos and emphasizes a culture of civility. These aspects create a comfortable place to build a career that appeals to all kinds of attorneys, Smith said.

“It’s not that we’re not aggressive on behalf of our clients, but we still can be civil in doing that,” he said. “When word gets out that you work in a good environment, that type of success feeds on itself.”

Targeting the best lawyers is a strategy in its own right, according to Smith.

“It’s an affirmation that people of all genders, races and orientations are good lawyers, and we want them all,” he said. “If people are fair about it, you will be seeing a lot of folks in the ranks that is reflective of the population.”

Lewis Brisbois focuses on adding candidates to the team who are a good fit, and if that happens to be a diverse lawyer, it happens to be a diverse lawyer, said Karen Campbell, the firm’s diversity committee chair.

“We embrace all people here,” she said.

Covington & Burling LLP

As a sixth-year associate at Covington, Anne Lee was asked by a senior partner to do an antitrust compliance presentation for a client by herself. She worried the opportunity was a bit of stretch for her, but the partner assured her she could handle it and helped her fine-tune the presentation.

“The firm is thoughtful about creating opportunities for developing attorneys, and that’s what has kept me here,” said Lee, a Korean-American attorney who is now a partner. “It’s helping me grow.”

Covington landed 33 minority attorneys, including four partners, last year, according to Law360 data.

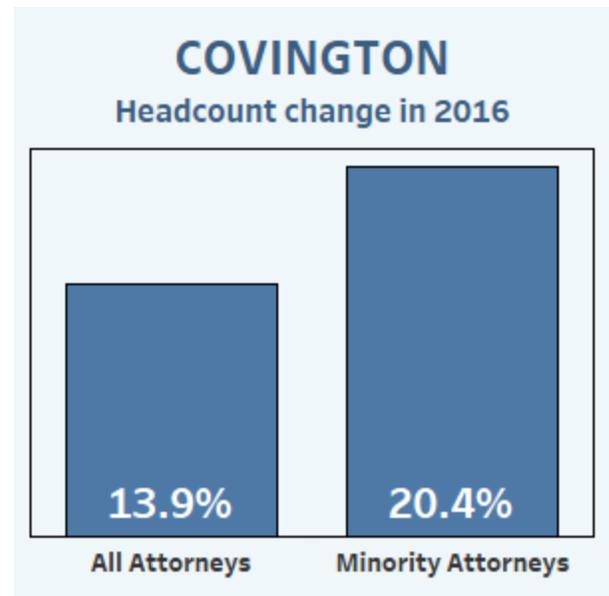
The firm focuses on providing meaningful work to associates and has affinity groups led by partners who encourage senior lawyers to advocate for opportunities on behalf of associates, said Tammy Albarrán, a Covington partner and diversity co-chair.

The firm, which also is piloting the Mansfield Rule, fosters a collaborative culture that aligns with diversity goals, Albarrán said. For instance, it endorses developing clients as a team instead of compensating partners based on origination credits.

“We don’t view clients as a particular partner’s — rather, they are the firm’s,” she said. “It makes it a place where diverse lawyers can succeed in ways that they might not be able to under a cutthroat, eat-what-you-kill compensation system.”

One way Covington promotes the firm is by inviting diverse recruits who have received job offers to fly back to Washington, D.C., or San Francisco. The firm puts on programs in these locales where diverse attorneys discuss their experiences at the firm and affinity group members host events at their homes, according to partner and diversity co-chair Michael Imbroscio.

“It creates a sense of community, and we’ve found that to be a tremendously effective and valuable way to communicate what it’s like to be a lawyer at Covington,” he said.

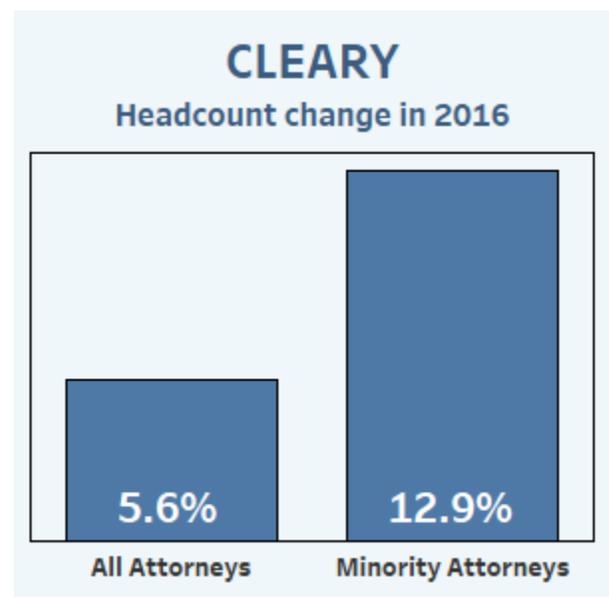


Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton

For years, Cleary Gottlieb has been intentional in ensuring incoming summer and first-year associates are diverse. Its recent class of first-years in New York, for example, consisted of 53 percent women, 48 percent minorities and 7 percent who are part of the LGBTQ community, based on data provided by the firm.

In 2016, Cleary Gottlieb picked up a total of 23 minority attorneys, according to Law360 data. Its attorney ranks are made up of 30 percent minorities, twice as much as the industry average.

The firm is now looking to make sure it is tapping into the full potential of its lawyers and developing their skills.



By engaging and investing in associates' development early and often, the firm hopes these efforts will help elevate attorneys, including minorities, into senior positions, said Carlos Dávila-Caballero, the firm's director of diversity and inclusion.

Among the ways Cleary Gottlieb seeks to accomplish this is through mentoring circles. Associates can join a circle of about 15 to 20 lawyers from all levels of seniority and gain different perspectives on handling firm and client issues. More than 235 lawyers took part in its most recent program, and with so many participants, the circles increase the chances of forming long-lasting mentoring relationships, Flow said.

"When we talk to diverse associates, they often focus on the importance of mentoring and access to networks that senior lawyers can introduce them to," said Flow, the diversity committee chair. "If we have efforts that ensure that kind of contact, and opportunity is taking place for everybody, our feeling is that increases [the advantages] exponentially for diverse associates."

--Editing by Jeremy Barker and Christine Chun.

Methodology: Law360 surveyed over 300 U.S. firms, or vereins with a U.S. component, about their overall and minority headcount numbers as of Dec. 31, 2016. Only U.S.-based attorneys were included in the survey, and firms had to have at least 20 U.S.-based attorneys to participate.

Firms had to participate in last year's Diversity Snapshot, based on the Law360 400 survey, in order to be eligible for this story.