

Facebook, Uber Among Cos. Sowing Diversity In Legal Ranks

By Michele Gorman

Law360 (February 12, 2019, 12:15 PM EST) -- Amid growing calls for corporate legal departments and law firms to diversify their ranks, in-house counsel at seven tech companies in the San Francisco Bay Area are collaborating to create a summer internship program for women, underrepresented minorities and other first-year law students who are committed to improving diversity and inclusion, the companies announced Tuesday.

The purpose of the Law in Technology Diversity Collaborative is to expand the pipeline of diverse lawyers, according to the press announcement, by providing at least 14 students with five weeks of in-house experience at eBay Inc., Facebook Inc., Hewlett Packard Enterprise Co., LendingClub Corp., Symantec Corp., Turo or Uber Technologies Inc., and another five weeks at Baker McKenzie, Boies Schiller Flexner LLP, Cooley LLP, Covington & Burling LLP, Fenwick & West LLP, Gibson Dunn & Crutcher LLP, Hogan Lovells, Mayer Brown LLP, Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP, Morrison & Foerster LLP, Orrick Herrington & Sutcliffe LLP or Perkins Coie LLP.

"We're trying to change the complexion of leadership in the legal industry," Patricia Svilik, senior counsel in the intellectual property counseling group at eBay who is spearheading the initiative, told Law360.

At firms, for example, the attorney workforce is still overwhelmingly white. The most recent Law360 Diversity Snapshot showed that minorities make up more than 30 percent of U.S. law school students but only 8 percent of equity partners at U.S. firms.

And the picture is not much brighter for women. Women make up more than half of law school students but just 35 percent of attorneys at firms and 21 percent of equity partners, according to Law360's 2018 Glass Ceiling Report.

The lawyers hope to provide their summer class of interns with the chance to develop their networks among their peers as well as with established in-house and firm lawyers, Svilik said. Not only will the structure of the program allow interns to realize the skills needed in both environments, but it will also provide them with a competitive edge for the future, as many legal department job postings in particular recommend previous related experience.

Keeping in mind that students at some schools don't typically have as much access to apply to such internships or programs as their counterparts at other institutions, the in-house lawyers are considering candidates from a mix of local and national schools, including Howard University School of Law;

Thurgood Marshall School of Law; University of California, Berkeley, School of Law; and University of Miami School of Law.

"There's a reason you don't see Harvard or Stanford on this list," Svilik said. "We're trying to make an impact where it can be felt more."

EBay's own internship program laid the foundation for the new collaborative. After the company hired two students each year for the past two summers, Svilik and her colleague, David Pilson, wanted to make a bigger impact. They reached out to their professional networks with the hope of ultimately forming a joint effort with some of their peers in the tech industry.

Realizing her small legal department at car-sharing company Turo has limited resources for such a program, Chief Legal Officer Michelle Fang jumped at the opportunity.

"It's a passion of mine that I do what I can to help promote diversity and inclusion in the legal profession," she told Law360.

Last month, Fang helped pen an open letter that more than 170 top corporate lawyers signed to call on firms to diversify their partnership classes or risk losing their in-house clients' business. The internship and letter are "bookends of the same goal," she said.

Aside from the new collaborative, in-house attorneys at other companies are working directly with their firms to build a more inclusive industry. For example, Adobe Systems Inc. last summer joined with Perkins Coie to roll out the Two Steps Ahead Scholars Program and with Arnold & Porter to begin the A-Squared Immersion Program to educate diverse first-year law students on the different components of in-house departments and firms.

The first Two Steps Ahead participant, University of Pennsylvania Law School student Jeremiah Oteh, referred to the entire experience as "life-changing," recently telling Law360 that he particularly enjoyed connecting with Adobe employees and other Silicon Valley corporate lawyers in informal settings outside of the office.

At a barbecue, Oteh met and interacted with Matthew Fawcett, the general counsel of data services and data management company NetApp Inc. After hearing about Fawcett's career and insights, Oteh understood that lawyers' career paths can take many forms.

"I was a sponge," he said.

Now back in Pennsylvania, Oteh said he has taken on leadership roles and enrolled in classes that he otherwise might not have considered. And the mentoring aspect has already taken hold. He has kept in touch with LaTrece Johnson, a manager on Adobe's legal operations team who is involved in the company's legal diversity and inclusion efforts, and Oteh serves as an unofficial mentor to his peers when they inquire about his experience.

While each tech company participating in the new initiative will make its own hiring decisions based on available capacity and space, the program is expected to place at least 14 candidates this summer. The interns' responsibilities and tasks will vary and be impacted by the size of each organization. But each in-house team will strive to take into consideration the students' interests when presenting them with substantive legal projects, Svilik said.

Fang said she expects the program will expand beyond the initial companies and firms, as well as geographically, because organizations from inside and outside of the tech industry already have expressed interest in joining the collaboration.

While acknowledging that different companies' internships might differ in tactics, timelines and methods, Fang applauded lawyers across the country for their efforts in trying to create a more diverse and inclusive profession.

"Let's support these students the best way we can," she said. "We're all heading in the same direction, sometimes separately, sometimes together."

--Additional reporting by Jacqueline Bell. Editing by Katherine Rautenberg.