

CLIENT EXPERIENCE

Achieving distinction through diversity

Hedieh Fakhriyazdi explains the link between diversity and the client experience.

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In the latest in a series of features, we ask Chief Diversity Officer Hedieh Fakhriyazdi what a great client experience looks like to her, with a particular focus on the role of diversity and inclusion (D&I).

Delivering a truly distinct client experience demands a diverse range of perspectives. That's one reason why diversity and inclusion has moved from being simply 'the right thing to do', to a business imperative for organizations across the globe.

"We know that diverse teams lead to greater innovation," explains Chief Diversity Officer Hedieh Fakhriyazdi. "That's one reason why delivering a distinct client experience depends on our client teams reflecting the diversity of the communities we (and our clients) live and work in."

According to Deloitte, diversity of thought enhances innovation by 20 percent, while a study by McKinsey revealed that companies with ethnically and culturally diverse boards are 43 percent more likely to experience higher profits.

"It's no wonder that D&I is a topic that our clients take extremely seriously," says Hedieh. "Those based in the United States and UK are especially committed to increasing diversity, equity and inclusion within their own organizations, so it is no surprise that they would expect the same from their law firm partners where they are allocating hundreds of thousands, if not millions of dollars. Not doing so would feel like a form of cognitive dissonance for them and a poor use of their financial resources."

"Requests for diversity-related data and metrics from our clients have increased exponentially, from 33 requests in 2020 to 157 in 2022 and we do not expect a slow down."

"This reflects the need to demonstrate that our teams are not only staffed with diverse lawyers – including women, people of color, members of the LGBTQ+ community and people with disabilities – but that our diverse lawyers are also leading pitches and billing significant hours to those clients."

"In other words, it is not enough (and never has been enough) for diverse lawyers to be simply staffed on matters. Our clients are also looking to see where (and who) the majority of their matter hours are being billed to."



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HEDIEH FAKHRIYAZDI,
CHIEF DIVERSITY OFFICER

“At its core, the work that we do in DE&I is about changing hearts and minds, while simultaneously creating a scaffolding that supports and institutionalizes that culture change.”

HEDIEH FAKHRIYAZDI, CHIEF DIVERSITY OFFICER



The client demand for increased diversity was also evident at a recent panel discussion hosted by the Firm's London office with GC's from Jeffries and JPMorgan Chase.

“We wanted our lawyers and Business Services professionals to better understand why diversity is such an imperative for our financial institution clients; what are they motivated by and what outcomes are they looking for. We felt our colleagues needed to better understand the context behind the diversity requests that many of our partners then receive,” says Hedieh.



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“It was reassuring to hear the GCs say that they are looking for progress on diversity, not perfection, simply because we know that perfection is not attainable. In other words, what they were saying is that they recognize that this work takes time and that quick fixes likely will not be sustainable in the long run and can't be the solution.

“If we want to become the trusted partner that our clients will turn to time and time again, we must reflect their values and help them solve difficult problems. Diversity and inclusion is a part of that equation, so diversity must continue to serve as a critical component of our overall strategy, both internally and externally. And, it needs to become a shared responsibility for all of us within the Firm.

“As part of that, we must be even more intentional when it comes to crafting pitch teams, staffing matters and continuing to increase diversity, equity and inclusion across the Firm. We are not just filling gaps – diversity and inclusion requires a significant degree of intentionality, sensitivity and cultural fluency, and it absolutely needs to be supported by systems and processes. Otherwise, none of our hard work will stick and culture will not change.”

Improving diversity and inclusion is also vital to recruiting, retaining and advancing the best talent. A 2020 survey by recruitment website Glassdoor found that 76 percent of job seekers consider diversity an important factor when choosing an employer and 32 percent wouldn't accept a job at a company that lacked diversity.

Hedieh says: “We know that diversity is incredibly important to the people we are hiring. Candidates want to see their personal values of inclusion and equity reflected in the values of the organizations they join. Similarly, our clients want to hire law firms whose values reflect their own.”

In her role as Chief Diversity Officer, Hedieh is keen to identify areas where the Firm can collaborate with clients, leveraging diversity and inclusion to launch joint initiatives and collectively tackle the lack of diversity in the legal profession.

She says: “Diversity can be a powerful and strategic tool in our relationship with our clients and creates unique partnership opportunities that can lead to broader social impact.”





According to Deloitte, diverse teams are 70% more likely to capture new markets and are 87% better at making decisions



A survey by Boston Consulting Group in the United States discovered that companies with above-average diversity produced a greater proportion of revenue from innovation (45% of total revenue) than companies with below average diversity (26%)



According to McKinsey, companies in the top quartile for being ethnically and culturally diverse are 36% more profitable than those in the bottom quartile

One example of a current client partnership is the Goldman Sachs Latitude Mentoring Program, where senior lawyers from the bank's legal department serve as mentors to our diverse mid-level associates in the United States and EMEA.

Internally, the Firm teamed up with McKinsey in 2022 and engaged 150 lawyers and Business Services professionals from diverse backgrounds in the Connected Leaders Academy, helping to equip our colleagues with peer networks and leadership skills. The program will be repeated in 2023.

Speaking of the Firm's overall approach to DE&I, Hedieh says: "I am particularly impressed with the thoughtful ways in which the Firm has integrated lawyers and Business Service professionals; this is something that you simply do not find that often at other law firms.

"Before I joined, the Firm reframed the Head of Diversity role to a Chief Diversity Officer position which now reports directly to the Executive Committee, sending a clear message that diversity is at the top of the Firm's agenda and therefore our global strategy.

"From a practical point of view, that new reporting line increases the visibility of the diversity function and catalyses the speed at which decisions can be made and implemented."

Hedieh is keen to see us take things to the next level as we drive towards our 2025 Strategy and beyond.

Hedieh says: "We are doing so much to embed a culture and practice of diversity and inclusion across the Firm. That being said, it is especially impressive that D&I is already very well integrated into many functions across the Firm. Our affinity networks and those in leadership functions (on the attorney and Business Services side of the house) have played a remarkable role in helping to ensure that this happens.

"At its core, the work that we do on DE&I is about changing hearts and minds, while simultaneously creating a scaffolding that supports and institutionalizes that culture change. The pace of change feels slow at times, but the small wins are often some of the greatest victories. We do need to take time out to celebrate those wins.

"Everyone across the Firm will play a role in helping us to meet our DE&I goals and everyone within the Firm brings some element of diversity to the table, including our white, cisgendered colleagues.

"Whether it be diversity of thought, socioeconomic diversity, religious diversity, neurodiversity, we tend to focus the majority of our time on gender, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation. These communities have been historically underrepresented within the legal profession, but the beauty about the diversity space is that it is incredibly vast, and therefore has a place for every single person at White & Case.

"Our clients rely on our ability to showcase that diversity with confidence, intentionality and fluency, and they are savvy enough to decipher when we are being genuine and when our efforts might be superficial.

"Diversity is in the DNA of our Firm, we just need to make it each and every person's responsibility to prioritize it. If we can make that commitment, then I have no doubt that we can be at the forefront of diversity, equity and inclusion in the legal profession."



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