

Are You Focusing Too Much On Your Diversity Program?

By [LawVision](#) on June 20, 2016

Diversity is a good thing. Actually it's a great thing. It's good for business in many ways. But the focus on diversity in the legal industry has become, for the most part, an exercise too tied to metrics and too formalized through programs and initiatives. In our quest to have the "right numbers" to satisfy surveys and target metrics imposed upon us by industry watchers – or ourselves – we have lost sight of the real value of diversity in law firms. For that reason, I am writing not from the standpoint of data but, rather, that of experience and passion.

There should be no question that diversity makes a difference. Acritas just published the [2016 Acritas Diversity Report](#) showing that very diverse teams (as defined by the study) capture a 25% higher share of wallet from clients than teams that are not diverse at all (again, as defined by the study). Now that there is some evidence of diversity's positive impact on business, can we now put the question of whether diversity actually makes a difference to rest?

I am confident in saying that those firms that have very diverse teams – and a greater share of wallet – do not simply establish a diversity program and call it a day. Rather, I suspect that these firms focus on their strategies and what they need to achieve these strategies and how diversity plays a role in this. Forward-thinking firms that focus on their markets, have strong cultures of inclusion and innovation, and put people (clients and talent) first. This attracts clients and, not coincidentally, diverse talent.

Most firms know diversity is a good thing but they don't really know why. It's a good thing because diverse teams provide a well-rounded client service, bringing diverse thinking and multi-faceted client interaction, creating "stickiness" that drives deeper client relationships. That is, diverse teams better reflect the client's world intellectually, emotionally, and physically. Of course, specific diversity needs should be, largely, driven by your firm's strategy. In order to know what the best diversity mix is for your firm, I recommend reviewing your strategy and understanding how diversity can help achieve your strategic direction.

- Are you targeting government set-aside work?
- Are you targeting largely local clients?
- Are you target clients Blue Chip firms that have an international presence?

Each of these – and every other strategy in between – will benefit from a different diversity composition. Focusing on your strategy and how diversity plays a role will likely result in a more meaningful and diverse talent pool than focusing on a specific program or initiative.

Don't get me wrong. Diversity programs can be a great start. I'm not advocating to get rid of diversity programs at all. Some firms have great diversity programs and I'm hoping more firms can replicate these. For firms that haven't quite gotten there, diversity programs serve to start the conversation. However, many firms say their programs are not working. My diagnosis, generically, for most of these self-described "unsuccessful programs" I have seen is that they are too artificial.

Diversity programs without a deeper meaning and connection to the firm's strategy and culture are typically viewed as

lacking sincerity. Diversity should be engrained in a firm's culture and focused on inclusion as much as, if not more than, diversity itself. I can't speak for all minority groups but a commonly held viewpoint is that overt programs are too superficial to be meaningful. They are viewed as superficial because they tend to be:

- Too forced – not genuine and, therefore, not sustainable;
- Too calculated – focused on metrics of diversity and not a culture of inclusion and, often, measuring the wrong thing; and
- Optional – join if you want or are told so not engrained into the firm and, therefore, not truly part of the fabric of the firm.

In my observation and experience, people from diverse backgrounds are no different than those from “non-diverse” backgrounds. We are looking for forward-thinking, innovative firms that accept, include and reward us for the unique contributions we bring to the table. We do not want to be a means to an end – a number or a tick in the box on a survey (bonus points for ticking multiple boxes!). People from diverse backgrounds, like everybody else, want to play an integrated role in the firm's strategy. We want to be an equal part of the equation for success.

Diversity is not about looking a certain way or having good statistics according to a survey or study; it's about people from different backgrounds coming together professionally to better serve clients and to further your firm's strategy by winning more work.