



Law Firms Lose Talent In-House Because of Diversity, GC Says

December 2, 2015

Law firms are facing a talent drain, a panelist declared at a law conference in Manhattan on Wednesday evening.

Sandra Leung, general counsel of Bristol-Myers Squibb, said that corporations are outperforming law firms at cultivating diversity, and, as a result, they are losing some of their best lawyers to in-house law departments.

“My compensation is based on achieving diversity goals,” Leung said, pointing out one way that her company has committed to achieving diversity. “We struggle, we make a lot of excuses, but I put my direct reports to the fire and say... it’s important to us to remain competitive.”

The comments came at a New York City Bar Association event on Wednesday evening, called “Finding Bliss in the Future of Legal Service & Practice,” which featured two other panelists:

Matthew Diller, dean of Fordham Law School and Thomas Reid, managing partner of Davis Polk & Wardwell.

Deborah Epstein Henry, who has [written extensively on the legal profession](#), moderated the discussion, which touched on how the law practice is evolving and what leaders can do to improve the working life of lawyers. Henry noted that happier lawyers perform better at work.

Throughout an hour and a half of dialogue, diversity took up the majority of the air time.

“The law firm’s loss is our gain,” noted Leung, at one point in the discussion when she referred to Reid, the managing partner of Davis Polk. “I recruited two women powerhouses who were once at Davis Polk and are now at Bristol-Myers.”

At one point, a plaintiffs attorney in the audience, Jeanne Christensen of Wigdor, posed a question to Reid, asking how his law firm supports diverse and female attorneys so they can climb the ranks.

Reid acknowledged that “the statistics are not impressive at all, clearly,” but said he makes a point to look at firm diversity in meetings with practice leaders three times a year as they “talk about how work at the firm is getting allocated.”

“That’s the foundation,” said Reid. “And on top of that we have a formalized mentoring program. It doesn’t match up people who are alike.”

He said that at the end of the day, achieving diversity “comes from an attitude of (leaders) caring and a desire to be engaged in everyone’s career.”

Reid added that firm leaders need to be “connected” with their younger attorneys, and with a nod to Leung, said that they have to communicate when they consider other career options, like “that awful position being offered by Sandy to go in-house.”

The leaders also touched on other topics, including innovation and recruiting.

Matthew Diller, dean of Fordham Law School, said he wishes law firms would stop recruiting first year law students.

“The hiring is still incredibly focused on a front loaded, early interview process, jammed in August in the first year,” said Diller, who called it his pet peeve. “We barely have gotten a hold of the students to work with them.”

Diller said that students nowadays can’t expect to easily join a big law firm directly out of law school and need to prepare for other alternatives.

(UPDATED: This article has been updated to clarify Tom Reid’s comments about firm meetings with practice leaders.)