

Pale, stale and male: the heights of the legal world are still not diverse enough

Linda Tsang

May 18 2017, 12:01am, The Times



Ofei Kwafo-Akoto: "Taking part in the first Creating Pathways programme in 2015 was invaluable"



Share

Save

It may be no surprise that the influential law reform campaign group Justice has warned that quotas may be needed to end the “pale, stale and male” stronghold in the judiciary; and that the failure of the British judiciary to keep pace with the increasing diversity of the legal profession is a threat to the quality and legitimacy of the bench.

Another report to focus on this diversity deficit — this time on the solicitors’ side of the profession, to be published on June 5 — is the Black Solicitors Network (BSN) diversity league table (DLT) — a demographic survey of the legal profession, sponsored by the Law Society.

Firms need to demonstrate a clear commitment to gender and BAME talent management as a key part of their strategy

Initial findings of the DLT 2017 are that gender and ethnic minority representation at junior levels are high, but farther up the ladder, only 27 per cent of partners are women, despite the fact that 60 per cent of trainees are women. Only 8 per cent of partners are from an ethnic minority background, despite 22 per cent of trainees being from such a background (Law Society figures from 2015).

Firms with the highest levels of trainee diversity are likely to have some of the highest levels of associate/partner diversity in subsequent periods, but they are no more likely to experience growth in the diversity of their associates and partners.

BSN was set up in 1995, and has a number of initiatives, such as careers workshops for students with leading law firms, and Creating Pathways, a mentoring and sponsorship programme in the City. For BSN's 2016/17 one-year programme, 17 mentees were partnered with mentors.

Ofei Kwafo-Akoto, a corporate law associate in the London office of the US firm Proskauer, found out about BSN in 2009 when he was looking for a training contract. He says: "Taking part in the first Creating Pathways programme in 2015 proved to be invaluable — it gave me a chance to evaluate critically my longer term objectives with a mentor, who could act as a useful sounding board as well as a sponsor. I received a job offer as a direct result of a personal recommendation from one of my mentors."

He is now on the Creating Pathways committee, where he says: "I can continue benefiting from the programme sessions and

have a say in assisting more junior lawyers who have similar challenges.

MONDAY JUNE 9 2017

With the DLT report due to be published next month, what could and should be done to deal with the diversity deficit?

Paulette Mastin, a counsel in the capital markets practice at Linklaters and the new chair of the BSN, says: “There is probably no single approach that all firms could adopt to address and resolve issues of gender and ethnic diversity and ethnic minority and equality. Indeed, the report findings reveal that many firms have implemented diversity policies and practices, and still there has been little discernible change in levels of representation at the top of the profession for women and ethnic minorities.

“Firms need to demonstrate a clear commitment to gender and BAME talent management as a key part of their business and growth strategy, which is embedded at all levels; encourage conversations around gender, race and ethnicity and equality to break down structural bias; and implement diversity and anti-bias training for all staff.”

blacksolicitorsnetwork.co.uk