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Three ways to create and maintain an effective D&I strategy, from Kirkland & Ellis

Earlier this year, [the Human Rights Campaign](#) (HRC) released its annual [Corporate Equality Index](#) in which a large number of law firms were awarded the title of 'Best Place to Work for LGBTQ Equality'. We [reached out to](#) some of the top-ranking firms, many of which have prominent trademark practices and feature in the [WTR 1000](#), to discuss the initiatives that have earned them that accolade.

In this guest piece, IP practice group partner and firmwide Diversity and Inclusion Committee co-chair Ellisen Shelton Turner reveals how Kirkland & Ellis forms its inclusive identity and ensures the professional development and success of all employees, highlighting two key factors that set the firm apart and his top tips for other firms looking to create – and maintain – an effective diversity and inclusion (D&I) strategy.

Guest analysis

Kirkland was honoured to be top-ranked in HRC's Corporate Equality Index for the 14th consecutive year in 2021. Our commitment to equality starts with our policies, including our non-discrimination policy, which includes sexual orientation and gender identity. We also provide eligible US employees with full parity of health, retirement, fertility/infertility, adoption/surrogacy and leave benefits, including for their spouses and partners, both same and different-sex, as well as access to a fully inclusive medical plan that provides services for medically necessary, transition-related care. And our HR department ensures that these policies are communicated and enforced appropriately across the firm.

Kirkland's commitment to advancing diversity is also ensured by our firmwide Diversity and Inclusion Task Force, which includes our chair and senior leaders from key committees. The task force, along with our firmwide Diversity and Inclusion Committee, drives diversity into existing work streams and facilitates Kirkland's diversity leadership in the legal industry. Our partner review process encourages broader sharing of key client relationships and credit among teams of lawyers. Contributions to our diversity mission and inclusive teams are explicit factors in the review criteria for equity partners.

Our LGBTQ community and programming are also core to forming the firm's inclusive identity and ensuring professional success for all of our attorneys and staff. The Kirkland Pride affinity group provides LGBTQ attorneys and staff with opportunities to build enduring, personal and professional relationships that are key to success in our field. Kirkland Pride's mentoring programme helps to build those connections and address the unique challenges of LGBTQ attorneys. The programme includes professional development sessions on subjects such as business development, networking, paths to partnership and building a book of business, which are hosted by mentors and subject-matter experts with topics selected by participating mentees.

Through our Inclusive Leadership Series, outside speakers discuss building diverse teams, fostering inclusion, communicating across differences and mitigating unconscious bias. Speakers have included Lambda Legal's Avery Belyeu on LGBTQ+ cultural competency, Robin Hood CEO and author Wes Moore on racial injustice and economic inequality in the United States, and Chicago Mayor Lori E Lightfoot on the intersection of Pride and activism.

What sets Kirkland apart

I have two decades of experience in the legal industry and, from my view, two things set Kirkland apart:

- the deep engagement in all aspects of D&I by the firm's top leaders in recruitment, retention, advancement and promotion; and
- the unwavering time and financial commitment to furthering D&I as a key performance indicator and business strategy for the benefit of everyone at the firm.

Kirkland's strong commitment to D&I is reflected in our D&I team as well. We have six full-time professionals committed to this space. They manage over 150 events and programmes each year furthering diversity, equity and inclusion education and training at Kirkland and across the legal industry.

Diversity policies around recruitment are not enduring unless there is an 'inclusion policy' for advancement and promotion to leadership. And, systemically, law firms still struggle with retention.

Apart from generational differences, students and young lawyers approach Big Law practice differently. Historically, women, people of colour and LGBTQ attorneys have not had access to critical relationships with the most important partners, to effective and engaged mentors or to sponsors who understand the value of sponsorship across difference and the inherent business opportunities of investing in women and diverse attorneys. At Kirkland, we are working to change that and lead where we can.

How to create an effective D&I strategy

- Engage your top leaders and help to educate and prepare them to be more thoughtful and to think again – to perhaps think differently.
- Link D&I to your business strategy and try to thread D&I efforts through every business function in the law firm.
- Commit the resources. Firms need to truly invest in and allocate budgetary and partner-time resources to the effort, retain knowledgeable and experienced D&I professionals, and give those D&I professionals a strong voice in guiding the business, particularly with respect to attorney professional development.

This article is part of an ongoing series on diversity and inclusion initiatives within leading law firms. For more in the series, see:

- [How Armstrong Teasdale is making DEI part of its DNA](#)
- ["There is always more work to be done": Baker McKenzie's first-ever D&I chief on global diversity efforts](#)
- ["Good intentions have not been effective": change comes from bold leadership, says Ballard Spahr chief diversity officer](#)
- ["The bedrock of a good D&I strategy is listening to your team": how Crowell & Moring is creating positive change in the workplace](#)
- [Locke Lord diversity chief offers practical tips on creating an effective inclusion strategy](#)
- ["The message from the top is clear": Nixon Peabody D&I director on importance of open communication](#)
- [An inside look at Reed Smith's diversity and inclusion strategy](#)
- ["What we believed was equal and fair a year ago may not be good enough now": interview with White & Case global diversity chair](#)
- [Womble Bond Dickinson US shares best practices for workplace inclusion](#)

Ellisen Shelton Turner

Partner | Kirkland & Ellis

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