

Associates in the Trenches

In Like Company

Some Associates Say the Grass Is Greener at Minority-Owned Firms

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Talent comes in many forms, but some minority lawyers say they had more opportunities to prove the truism after joining a minority owned law firm.

In those surroundings, they say, there is greater recognition that good lawyers don't all have to act or look a certain way, and partners often take a personal interest in associates' long term career goals.

Working with people like yourself does provide comfort, says Lee P. Jeronimo, a Houston associate. Jeronimo is a lesbian, and she works at a law firm where all of the partners and associates are gay.

"We know that we're part of the Bible Belt, and there are people here who would shun us, but we have our own community," she says. "It's a little separatist, but it's comfortable."

Jeronimo, a former accountant who took on the law as her second career, doubts that she could have gotten a job with most other area firms because of her age and sexual orientation. And even if she did, Jeronimo says, she doesn't think she'd be comfortable at such a place. "Here, it's a very relaxed, a very loving, if you will, environment because there's no testosterone polluting the air," she adds. "I've probably got the most testosterone of anybody."

For one Latina lawyer in Southern California, the difference became readily apparent once she left her minority owned firm.

"I think at [the minority law firm], I felt the attorneys had a lot more confidence in my abilities and more of a comfort level and confidence in me generally," says the lawyer, who asked not to be named.

Although she graduated from a University of California law school and completed a federal clerkship, this associate says that it's taken her a while to feel comfortable socializing with her current firm's partners, most of whom are white and male.

"When I first started interviewing, the person on the other side seemed so foreign to me--there would be a joke or something, and I just didn't get it," she says.

"As I started working, I began acclimating myself, and once I spent more time with older, middle aged white men, I began understanding their jokes, but it was such a culture shock. The difference might have been a generational thing, but nevertheless it was really difficult."

More Meaningful Mentoring

Partners at minority firms often come from large firm backgrounds, says Arin Reeves, a Chicago lawyer and diversity consultant. “A lot of them, albeit very successful in the majority law firms, really understand the concept of being marginalized and have an understanding of what it is to let talent go unrecognized and undeveloped.”

A common way these minority partners change the playing field for minority associates is by placing an emphasis on mentoring. Although there are associate mentoring programs at white majority firms, often most of the mentors and those they help are white and male, says Reeves, who has a doctorate in sociology and has studied race and gender issues in law firms.

“Women are just recently starting to break out of the mold that they weren’t aggressive enough to be litigators,” Reeves says. “With a lot of minority lawyers, it’s the same way--minority lawyers may not be able to look, act, behave and politic in a way law firm partners are used to seeing lawyers do it, so a lot of times they get deemed as not having the same potential.”

Brenda Robinson, a black associate at a minority owned firm in Chicago, appreciates the individual attention from the name partners at her firm, two of whom are black. “I think minority partners recognize the need to mentor younger minority attorneys because of the smaller number of minority attorneys in the field,” Robinson says. “Not just the minority partners, but all of the partners recognize the need to have individual contact with all of the associates.”