



Weil Gotshal & Manges

Weil's established diversity policy wins a major commendation.

It is unlikely the Pilgrim Fathers and Mothers knew just how important multiculturalism would be when they landed in the New World. Although building a respectful blend of cultures came below survival on the agenda for those early pioneers, the country that evolved into the United States has since undergone major cultural and social upheavals towards inclusion. Since the 1980s, this has been reflected in one law firm's quest to move away from an imported European tradition that overlooks certain sections of society. "It was important for one firm to blaze a trail so the profession could come up behind," suggests Meredith Moore. "I knew Weil was the pioneer."

In the 1990s, Meredith, who had been interested in identity politics since university, was working for a non-profit organisation endeavouring to build inclusive workplaces. Meredith's studies examined the hiring techniques of various corporations. In 2001 she worked on a study called "Women in Law", finding that one firm had instigated a diversity programme way back in 1984. That groundbreaking firm was Weil Gotshal & Manges, established in the 1930s when a trio of bright attorneys unable to find suitable positions in white-shoe law firms founded a firm to welcome anyone with talent. Recently, the firm broke another mould in hiring a person dedicated to implementing its diversity policies.

Weil, squarely on the diversity map, then offered Meredith the role of the firm's third

diversity professional. "I was able to come here knowing what the skill set was and how to operate within the realities of a professional services firm," she says. "It's like having an in-house consultant: I can draw on bits and pieces from my research background and experience with lots of organisations to implement a well-designed and articulated strategy that will work in this particular environment."

One of Meredith's first projects was to analyse the firm's existing diversity policy but she recognised that the most pressing concern is "not who can come through the door, rather keeping the diverse talent we have". She works to ensure that overt or subtle bias doesn't get in the way of the firm's efforts to retain the best people, an endeavour reflected in the London office. The firm launched here in 1996 and began recruiting graduates in 2001, when Jillian Singh was hired to bring the recruitment procedure in line with the City competition. "One of the first things I did when I arrived was look at the whole application process," recalls Jillian. "Some students saw the stereotypical white, middle-class male and perhaps thought that law wasn't for them. I had to look at the whole diversity spectrum and think about how to get our name out there to show we are a really good employer."

Opportunely, a non-profit mentoring organisation for young people from ethnic minority backgrounds in New York had just launched in London. A number of the United



States' largest companies had already benefited from the Sponsors for Educational Opportunity (SEO) programme, which fulfilled Weil's goal of ensuring that those coming through the door do so from a range of backgrounds. "How do you provide support at an early age to show that this is an attainable path?" asks Meredith. Jillian knew that SEO was part of the answer and Weil in London soon became a sponsor firm. "We're now using it as a recruitment tool as well as a diversity initiative," she reveals. The pioneering programme supplies two students from non-traditional backgrounds; the firm assesses them on the same criteria as candidates on work placement schemes – that is, with a view to offering a training contract.

Pierre Agyeman, structured finance partner, not only acts as an SEO mentor, but also supports the firm's involvement with the City Solicitors' Educational Trust summer school programme. The scheme is designed to provide students from non-Russell Group universities with the soft skills needed for business. The firm also launches its own initiatives. Most recently, Weil sent a team of people to the Harris Academy in Bermondsey, southeast London, to run workshops covering the breadth of careers on offer in a law firm, from IT to secretarial. "It's important that students get to see that law firms are much more than just lawyers," says Pierre. "You can have a valid and rewarding career in a law firm outside being a lawyer."

The positive effect of such programmes takes several years to trickle down – but when they do, they are self-evident. Pierre has met candidates at careers events who, three or four years later, he has welcomed into the firm as trainees. This is when the firm's diversity agenda really kicks in, having always made a point of supporting diversity inside the firm. Affinity groups, the backbone to the diversity policy, are based around the

traditional diversity distinctions such as gender and ethnicity. The largest in London is Women@Weil, which provides lawyers with informal mentoring and access to role models, and sponsors events that educate colleagues on issues that affect everyone, not just women. In the United States, the sister group recently held a series of talks on care for the elderly.

Any session organised by an affinity group is voluntarily attended but, for over two decades, Weil has persisted in delivering mandatory staff training on diversity issues for every new member of the firm – in any position, at any level. "Diversity training makes people aware of the differences within the organisation," says Pierre, who recently received more in-depth training upon reaching partnership. And an award-winning format wins brownie points with clients, too. "Prospective clients assume you're an excellent lawyer," he notes. "So you need to bring more to the table. You need to bring an understanding of the client's business and be creative about problem solving. A firm with a culture where diversity matters and is celebrated gives you that edge." Weil was one of the first global organisations to adopt diversity training, almost 25 years ago when Jane Elliott's famous blue-eye/brown-eye experiment had been transposed from her Ohio classroom to company boardrooms. It was an obvious move for Weil, a firm founded on an inclusive philosophy where social and ethnic background means nothing. "Every person who joins the firm needs to appreciate that culture," says Pierre. "Differences are positive in the main and can be explored in an open and honest way."

In order to explore and support such differences, Meredith relies on the firm's global history. "When you're operating globally, already you're confronted with cross-cultural differences. That gives us an edge

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because we already have to practise that. It makes it easier to apply on a more local scale in your particular office.” Pierre agrees, but stresses that every office is different. Having worked in New York for two years before returning to London, he has experienced the distinctive characters of the two offices first-hand. “The difference is cultural in that some of the groups don’t translate over,” he says. “Afro-American doesn’t translate to Black British.” Similarly, in an office the size of Weil’s London base, there’s little point having a group akin to New York’s Black Attorneys group because the numbers work against that. Pierre, who represents London on the firm’s global diversity committee, is therefore exploring ways of linking up with other like-minded firms to establish a kind of inter-firm affinity group.

In addition to this cutting-edge initiative, the firm is holding a Diversity Week in November 2008 packed with multicultural activities, talks and an exhibition of art provided by Scope and Prospects. It is schemes like these that secure Weil’s place in the black with regard to diversity. Jillian is so proud of the firm’s achievements that she delights in talking about them – even in training contract interviews. Recently a candidate asked about the proportion of women reaching partnership (in London, it’s currently two out of 24; Jillian sits on the development and retention committee which is committed to trying to improve these figures). For now, she’s content that the cultural sea change is a topic of conversation. Meredith says that in the United States, the proportion of women reaching partnership has held steady since a major boost 10 to 20 years ago but now “women are becoming more empowered to ask what we are doing to advance women and about work-life balance”. Men are talking about it too, and becoming just as empowered. At a recent reception about parenting and work, Meredith



was pleased to see a high proportion of men asking questions. “That’s not just a shift in the values,” she says. “It’s also a boost in empowerment. There’s less stigma for a man to talk about parenting now.”

On the graduate recruitment frontline, Jillian has noticed that candidates are increasingly better informed about diversity issues. Meanwhile, Weil plans to continue to push the envelope in supporting all members of staff: what many commentators see as the final frontier – candidates with disabilities – has finally been broached. “I’ve had to oversee adjustments to make it easier for trainees with disabilities to do their jobs,” Jillian confirms. So the mission to create a positive, inclusive working environment is fully underway and, clearly, Weil is at the forefront of a major change in the legal profession. But the firm’s global director of diversity is far from complacent. “There’s more work to be done,” Meredith says enthusiastically. “One of Weil’s key attributes is that we’re never keen to rest on our laurels. Ten years from now, law firms will be a different place. If you look back 10 years you’ll see the seeds of change.”

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By **Adam Smith**

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