



# DLA Piper UK LLP

## Follow the pied piper: global giant DLA Piper leads the way with its impressive diversity initiatives

Time to walk the walk. Diversity policies are commonplace among law firms, but in August 2011 the Legal Services Board (LSB) announced that firms will soon be required to publish internal diversity and social mobility data on their websites. It will no longer be enough to pay lip service to diversity – the world will be able to see whether a firm is really living up to those values.

Recognised at the 2011 LC.N Training & Recruitment Awards with the Commendation for Diversity, DLA Piper has been walking the walk for quite some time. The award is given to one firm that actively strives to promote equality in its workforce and across the profession as a whole, and was presented by Debo Nwauzu, founder and chair of the *Black Lawyers Directory (BLD)*. She commented: “Law firms accept that commitment to diversity is not an optional extra, but rather an integral part of any business that is forward-looking and forward-thinking.”

DLA Piper is the world’s largest firm by revenue, with around 4,200 lawyers in 76 locations. Its motto is “Everything matters”, including a commitment to “not only comply with [diversity] legislation, but to take a progressive approach to create a mix of talent that makes us ever more successful as a business”. Puneet Tahim, graduate recruitment officer in the firm’s London office, affirms the core message behind the firm’s diversity policy: “We value and respect the individual; everything is centred on that. We’re a massively broad firm in terms of

geography, practice areas and clients, whom we can’t service to the best of our ability unless we have a diverse workforce. So that has to be central to recruitment.” Combined with this is the ethical dimension, where “people must be treated fairly and able to work in an environment free from discrimination”.

Karen Friebe is a partner in DLA Piper’s real estate group and head of DLA’s hospitality and leisure sector group for Europe. She is also chair of DLA Piper’s Women’s Network, which was formed a year ago. She has a sense that change is afoot: “Law firms in the City are some of the hardest nuts to crack in terms of diversity, but they are getting the message that they have to be representative of the world around them.” She feels that the new LSB diversity stats requirements will almost certainly have a positive impact: “I think it will make many firms think twice and will force them to think more carefully about what they do and who they hire.”

Buy-in across the entire firm and support from the very highest levels are essential – evidenced at DLA Piper by the fact that both senior partner Janet Legrand and regional managing partner David Bradley sit on the UK Diversity Board. And the backing goes higher still. “Sir Nigel Knowles, our managing partner, is a massive supporter of our diversity and inclusion policies,” explains Karen. “He understands how important they are in a global business.” Puneet agrees



wholeheartedly: “It has to be a top-down thing – the firm needs to be educated on why they have to take diversity seriously. It’s one thing for HR to fly the banner for diversity, but sometimes you need a bit more power behind the message.”

So how does a firm go about translating that message into attracting and recruiting the best candidates, representing a broad spectrum of backgrounds and experiences? “We’ve never been a firm that recruits just from the top 10 universities,” explains Puneet. “For example, this year we’re going to around 30 law fairs; some of that is governed by targeting universities local to our eight UK offices, but we always look at a broad range of universities. With the rise in tuition fees and living costs, many people are studying closer to home, so may find themselves at a lesser-known university. It doesn’t make them any less worthy or brilliant. We cast our net widely so that we don’t exclude people.”

Marimba Odundo-Mendez – then an anthropology student at University College London, now a second-year trainee at the firm – says that his impressions of DLA Piper’s recruitment style coincide with what Puneet and the graduate recruitment team are trying to achieve. “When I was applying, DLA Piper’s representatives on campus seemed very diverse. And while some firms only take people from the London and Oxbridge universities, DLA Piper looks at people from all backgrounds.” He was also

attracted by what seemed to be “an exciting, expanding, global law firm, where you got a lot of experience”. He observes that the diversity agenda is not shoved down your throat: “It’s one of those things where you don’t notice a massive push, but you do notice an eclectic mix of people.”

A net cast wide ensures a healthy number of training contract applications. Karen describes how this stage is crucial: “We do not automatically deselect individuals who have not achieved a 2.1 degree. We read every single form, and if someone’s got a 2.2, but compelling mitigating circumstances, they stand a chance.” When we spoke to her, Puneet had just finished reading over 1,000 applications for the London office, in an attempt to whittle them down to 56. But she is strict on the ‘read ‘em all’ policy: “Some think diversity is about lowering standards; it’s not. It’s about not removing people from the process just because of certain characteristics. So we still have the usual 2.1 degree and ABB A-level minimum, but we read each application to get a sense of who that person is, what they’ve done and why they might be good for us.”

The firm is also keen to support events in the legal arena that focus on increased access to the profession. Some of the external organisations that DLA Piper gets behind include the *BLD*, Pathways to Law, Prospects in the City and TARGETchances. In addition, the Women’s Network brings in

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inspirational female speakers – Cherie Blair was a recent visitor to their Liverpool office – to give tips on how to get ahead. “When I first made partner in the City, I’d never have dared to have photos of my children on my desk,” says Karen. “Now I have a whole shelf of them! It takes people to speak out and say, ‘Yes it’s hard, but this is how it can be done and we’re here to support you.’”

The need for support and transparency was a key driver behind the recent introduction of the firm’s Women’s Network, which now has over 600 members. “The Diversity Board wanted to focus on supporting women to achieve their full potential in the workplace, especially increasing female retention rates,” explains Karen. “There are large numbers of women coming into the profession – just over 50% - but as they progress, the numbers drop. It’s often linked with maternity choices.” She says that for younger women, issues surrounding maternity hold great significance: “I have trainees coming to me and asking how they can fit in family life alongside a successful career. I think that senior women have a responsibility to share their experiences with those starting out in their careers.” The firm is currently reviewing its flexible working practices – something which is very important to both men and women. “And we very much welcome men into the network,” emphasises Karen.

Everyone agrees that the benefits of a diverse workforce to an organisation are myriad and nowhere more obviously than in terms of attracting and retaining clients – particularly in a firm of DLA Piper’s size and breadth. “Our clients come from all across the world,” says Marimba, “and it’s

important to reflect that as much as possible, with people from different backgrounds able to bring different skills to the table.” Karen agrees, and thinks that the clients themselves help drive change: “If we’re pitching for work, many clients now want to know our diversity stats. They want to employ a firm that mirrors their own values and vision, so we can’t automatically send four white men in pinstriped suits to pitch. They have to be representative of the firm and of the clients we are pitching to.”

Karen feels that the new generation of would-be trainees have a responsibility to make their voices heard on these issues and not to accept being fobbed off: “Students on our summer schemes and open days ask penetrating questions about sustainability and diversity, which is entirely appropriate. If they’re not satisfied with the answers a firm gives, they may choose not to pursue a career with that firm.” She makes the point that “candidates should be assured that there are proper policies in place and that the firm really believes in those policies rather than just paying lip-service to them”.

DLA Piper is an international law firm and its US colleagues have been used to collating and providing diversity statistics when pitching for a number of years. DLA Piper in the UK is keen to learn from the experiences and initiatives of their US counterparts. Karen comments: “I learned from a recent conversation with our US head of diversity that each of our US offices held an event on 8 March 2010 to coincide with International Women’s Day. Next year, the plan is to go global!”

Similarly inspired by a scheme in the States where junior lawyers from minority



groups are put under the wing of senior partners whose job it is to promote them at every opportunity, Karen is keen to see whether DLA Piper can emulate the idea of “champions” here in the UK. The Women’s Network also tries to support corporate responsibility initiatives which align with their values. One such example is the involvement of female solicitors on the board of Women Win, a global charity which uses sport as a strategy to advance women’s rights.

Puneet takes the view that a ‘cradle to grave’ approach is what helps DLA Piper stand out among its peers: “Our diversity policy is end to end; it’s at the centre of everything, not just recruitment. So it runs from when people first meet us at university right up until they make partner.” Marimba suggests that “it’s a long career path and improvements in diversity throughout the profession will take time, but among my contemporaries there is a good mix of people. The graduate recruitment team does a lot to help this – DLA Piper is a big global firm which has opened up avenues to those with ability, regardless of where they’re from”. There is reason to be optimistic that ever more avenues will be created, with firms like DLA Piper taking the lead.

By **Isla Grant**



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Norway, Poland, Russia, Singapore,  
Slovak Republic, Spain, Thailand, Turkey,  
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What the judge from  
*BLD* said:

***“With a firm-wide commitment to diversity, spear-headed by the senior management team, this firm recognises that diversity is not about what was done in the past – rather, it is an ongoing process. The firm is involved in a wide range of external activities, both locally and nationally, and provides hands-on help to people at different academic and professional stages. Internally, it also has diversity initiatives in place to support its staff and foster talent, as well as yardsticks for measuring the success of these initiatives.”***