

## Diversity – Law Firms

# Diversity Comes Naturally To Fragomen

Johanna Marmon

FRAGOMEN, DEL REY, BERNSEN & LOEWY, LLP

In a time when law firms of all sizes and scope are making concerted efforts to improve and encourage diversity among their ranks – some going as far as to launch specific diversity initiatives – Fragomen, Del Rey, Bernsen & Loewy stands well apart from the crowd. The founding partners of this global immigration powerhouse realized from the start that diversity would happen organically – and it has been a hallmark of the firm since the beginning.

“At the very inception of the firm, the partners recognized that talent in any form should be rewarded, and so there have never been barriers to working with all ethnic groups and genders,” says equity partner Cynthia Juarez Lange, who was incidentally elected the firm’s first minority woman partner in 1992. “Over the last few years many other law firms have recognized the importance of diversity, but we have been there all along.”

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Just look at the firm’s six recently elected partners: five of the six are women, with a number of them also being ethnic minorities. All speak at least two languages, including Farsi, Korean, Spanish and French – another nod to their culturally diverse backgrounds. But what is perhaps even more remarkable, says equity partner Michael Patrick, is that those factors didn’t arise in the conversations he and his colleagues had leading up to their promotion. “At Fragomen, we try to have a platform of equality, fairness and assessment of skills, talent and ability in a way that looks solely at what one produces and contributes,” Patrick says. “That is one of the things I admire about this firm.”

That platform is nothing if not a springboard for the firm’s colleagues – all of whom say the sky’s the limit at Fragomen. “There are no roadblocks to success here,” says new partner Car-

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mita Alonso. “Our career paths go as high as we can take them.” Indeed, diversity, from the paralegal level to partner level, is simply a part of Fragomen’s cultural DNA – and thus is something its workforce as a whole rarely, if ever, thinks about. “It is such a non-issue here,” says partner Michael Boshnaick, who didn’t think twice about being the only male in an otherwise female partner class. “I think what it boils down to is that a lot of other firms talk the talk, but we walk the walk.”

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### Worldwide Perspective

Fragomen’s diversity is a welcome component with the practice area being one that services a richly textured patchwork of individuals and companies from virtually every culture and nation around the globe. “Our diversity program was not artificial, but grew from the firm’s openness to diversity and dedication to quality lawyering,” says Lange. At the same time, she says, while many other law firms might employ a varied workforce, diversity is not reflected at the partner level. Fragomen is in another league entirely.

“One of the unique characteristics of our firm is that not only do we employ many women and minorities, but our partnership also reflects the same commitment to diversity,” says Lange. “Being able to have people who can adapt to different cultures and understand different models helps tremendously. Knowing that when we bring people to the table that can deliver high quality strategic advice while bringing a unique perspective helps in meeting our client’s needs.”

Indeed, says new partner Cynthia Shearn. “It’s critical to bring together people of varied backgrounds in making decisions on a day-to-day basis, simply because our clients’ employees themselves are so diverse,” she says. “Being sensitive to different cultures is an important part of what we do, and if you lose sight of that, it’s a problem.” This perspective is supremely important in a field of law that is, in essence, all about people. Attorneys must be prepared to deal with foreign nationals – most of whom represent the brightest talents – in countries around the world on a daily basis.

This awareness is one that all of the firm’s attorneys share, and what gets to the heart of what Fragomen is about –

and how its intrinsically diverse nature helps define its approach to client service. “We realize that having people of diverse backgrounds on staff at many levels strengthens us as a firm and sensitizes us to client needs,” echoes Patrick. “It has proven to be the case, decade after decade, and is something that we are proud of.”

Significantly, because Fragomen has been able to foster diversity organically, it has never needed a specific program in place for hiring, nor does it have quotas or set goals to meet. The firm looks for a potential hire’s ability to communicate – on paper, via email, by phone or in person – regardless of whether it’s at the junior paralegal level or an attorney brought on laterally. Once on board, new hires’ abilities are nurtured so that they are set up for success. “No lawyer is ever brought in to meet a quota or promised something and allowed to fail,” says Lange. “All of our women and minorities excel as top lawyers in the field.”

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### Diversity: Not Just Race Or Gender

Fragomen, which has 28 offices on four continents, is also keenly aware that diversity is not just skin deep, and is committed to fostering an environment where different ideas are also nurtured. “We practice law in a field where you have to be a real strategist to get certain cases approved, and it’s not easy to work within the limitations that are imposed in the immigration arena,” says Parisa Karaahmet, another member of Fragomen’s new partner class. “To think outside the box is encouraged. We’re not particularly hierarchical, either, and while we’re a large firm, we don’t act like it. I have found that everyone here is very approachable.”

To be sure, that very lack of hierarchy is what Boshnaick thinks is the lynchpin of Fragomen’s diverse nature, in both race and gender and in the development of ideas. “We’re more democratic than other firms,” he says. “And diversity is really at the heart of democracy, which thrives on different people and multiple ways of thinking about things and doing things.” For her part, new partner Jin Park credits the firm’s myriad of committees – at all different levels – as being an easy and

effective way to showcase different ideas. “Without question, the committees invite and appreciate other people’s opinions,” says Park, who started at the firm in 1995 right out of law school.

But it’s not to say that recruitment efforts are easy because of the 1000-member firm’s openness. For one thing, the immigration arena is a practice area that a lot more firms are jumping into – and when more opportunities are created, attracting the right candidates can be a touch more challenging. But once an attorney is on board, he or she is usually in it for the long haul, says partner Haseena Enu. “Because firm management doesn’t use billable hours – although we all work hard and expect associates and paralegals to work hard – the overall quality of life at the firm is good,” Enu says.

So what attracts talent to Fragomen anyway, and what makes them stay? While its diverse nature is alluring, it is the firm’s reputation, its resources and the quality of work its members put out on a daily basis that are among its most captivating qualities. As the firm continues to grow and expand around the world, these attributes will also continue to set the firm apart.

And that, of course, is just what Fragomen’s founding partners had in mind when the firm was established over 50 years ago – and is what will undoubtedly help propel it into the future. “We would like to continue to provide our clients with the highest level service, advance women and minorities and mentor our lawyers as they progress in their careers,” says Lange. “We will continue to look beyond race and gender and promote the best people who can do the job.”

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At the end of the day, Fragomen is on the right track. “We’re very proud of what we have accomplished,” says new partner Martine Cuomo. “The firm’s diversity translates into a better understanding of the clients we work with.”

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