

3 MINUTE READ

Effect of COVID on Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (D.E.I.) Efforts



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EFFECTS OF COVID ON DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSION (D.E.I.) EFFORTS

WRITTEN BY DR. SHARON MEIT ABRAHAMS

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When the pandemic hit in 2020, DEI professionals immediately thought about what happened during the 2008 recession. Law firm diversity initiatives ground to a standstill and budgets were cut. Kori Carew, Seyfarth's Chief Inclusion & Diversity Officer, explains that DEI leaders across the profession immediately mobilized discussing, "What can we do so that what happened in 2008 doesn't happen again?"

IN 2020, MY FIRM'S COMMITMENT TO D.E.I.

Remained the Same: 50%

Expanded their Efforts: 42.5%

Data collected from a recent survey conducted by Legal Talent Advisors, LLC

"Bonnie Lau, the partner at Morrison Foerster and alumni chair of the Leadership Council on Legal Diversity (LCLD), reported that "LCLD

members have stayed committed to maintaining the status quo or even adding DEI resources.” To underscore that, a recent survey conducted by Legal Talent Advisors, LLC showed that nearly 50% of respondents stated their firms’ commitment to DEI efforts stayed the same, while 42.5% reported that their firms expanded their efforts in 2020.

The survey also found that 55% of respondents reported that their firms’ DEI budgets remained the same, with 30% saying they increased. Less than 3% had their budgets frozen and only 2.5% saw a reduction in their DEI budgets. The summer of 2020 saw many racial events transpire across the nation, so, it is unclear if the budgets were affected due to these events or COVID, or both.

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IN 2020, MY FIRM’S D.E.I. BUDGET

Stayed the Same: 55%

Increased: 30%

Was Frozen: 3%

Was Reduced: 2.5%

Data collected from a recent survey conducted by Legal Talent Advisors, LLC

Once everyone began working from home, diversity budgets were reallocated because more funds were available due to in-person events being canceled. Jenner & Block used their diversity dollars to have “more speakers, more events and everyone could be invited because there were no conference room space constraints,” shared Courtney Carter, Jenner’s Director of Diversity & Inclusion. Michelle Weber, COO of Bilzin Sumberg, noted that “To our great satisfaction, the virtual nature of these [DEI] initiatives invited more participation than in-person events would have.” Across the country, firms noted that attendance is higher at virtual events as compared to in-person events.

Newly-built attorney communities are another positive outcome from the effects of COVID. Carew said that Seyfarth went immediately into a communications mode to reach out to diversity attorneys. Her team educated the firm on barriers that exist for diverse attorneys and how COVID has exacerbated those obstacles. Similarly, Carter commented, “from the moment COVID started we were very focused on the communities in the firm.” Uniquely, they started with their Care-Giver Affinity group, which consists of attorneys and staff. It is common knowledge that women have endured the brunt of COVID-related caregiving, so Jenner’s efforts were appreciated.

While there is no doubt the pandemic upended many businesses, some law firms used the disruption as an opportunity to focus more energy on their DEI department, while other firms simply became busier than usual. Clearly, the pandemic affected DEI efforts across the board. Fortunately, these efforts were and are continuing to move in a positive direction. It is safe to say that history has not repeated itself.

Another diversity-focused benefit of working in a virtual world is, "it is far easier to work across geographical lines when we are all remote, which means more and better opportunities for all", as observed by Yusuf Z. Zakir, Chief Diversity & Inclusion Officer at Davis Wright Tremaine LLP. Oftentimes, the lack of challenging work with quality clients is cited as a reason for the failure of women and diverse attorneys to grow and develop in their roles. This wall has now been torn down as attorneys can work across offices and departments with ease.



Dr. Sharon Meit Abrahams is a legal talent development expert with 25+ years of experience coaching lawyers and helping firms increase engagement, retention, and productivity. She can be reached at Sharon@legaltalentadvisors.com.



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