

Diversity: Beyond the Rhetoric

Diversity policies and training are now becoming more common-place in the workplace, including in law firms. These initiatives are to be welcomed for making it clear that diversity is an important part of the modern ethos for conducting business. **Reports Alison Dennis, Partner, Reed Smith**

Going beyond the policies and training, how can businesses and in particular law firms turn “diversity” as an ideal into a reality?

The current crisis in associate recruitment for law firms serves to underline the point that diversity is not just an ethical issue, but it also makes good business sense. The challenge is for law firms to encourage women and individuals from minority groups to apply to their particular firm, and to then retain them in an inclusive environment.

Reed Smith's management sees this issue as paramount in the development of the business and has made a significant investment in meeting this objective. Regular women's career advancement workshops are held for women at key stages of their careers. The workshops have been designed with external consultants, and go some way to demystifying advancement of women through the firm. However, the most important aspect of the workshops is to open dialogue with senior women from across the firm. There is no better way to shatter the myth of the glass ceiling than to provide open access to women who

have negotiated the career ladder and who are very willing to offer advice and assistance to those still on the ascent. One pleasing consequence of these workshops is the number of applicants for training contracts who refer to these workshops as a motivating factor for their application.

The women's career advancement workshops compliment Reed Smith's commitment to overall diversity. In this regard, the firm has held a firm-wide diversity meeting for minority lawyers, including an open forum and networking opportunities. Reed Smith is also actively involved in programmes for encouraging minority young people to study law and become lawyers and has hosted different diversity forums with the Law Society and other groups. These activities have again attracted applications from strong minority candidates who realise that the firm is serious about the issue of diversity.

Reed Smith has put its diversity policy into action with a number of practical initiatives. As a result of its efforts, over the last five years firm-wide the number of minority lawyers has tripled and the number of minority

partners has quadrupled. Furthermore, the number of women partners in the UK firm has doubled over the last three years. Reed Smith maintains diversity as a core firm value which informs firm management and training. The aim is to improve even more on these figures, and in particular to ensure that the firm is a place where women and individuals from a diverse range of backgrounds will want to continue to work.