

Diversity Recruitment: Bridging the Gap by Building Bridges!

By Vittoria "Giugi" Carminati

Many talk of diversity, but few can single-handedly increase diversity in the legal profession. Defying the odds, a dedicated committee of five in the Virginia Bar Association YLD has not only hosted a diversity recruitment job fair but has also done so successfully for the past three years.

In 2006, Matt Cheek, Chair of the VBA YLD, organized town hall meetings with recruiters from law schools to ask them one question: What can the VBA do for you? The recruiters answer: Help us diversify the Virginia bar.

Heeding the call, Matt Cheek reached out to the current Co-Chairs of the VBA YLD Diversity Recruitment Committee—Elaina L. Blanks (representing Hampton Roads/Eastern Virginia), Dana A. Dews (representing Richmond/Central Virginia), Monica McCarroll (representing Richmond/Central Virginia), Karen R. Robinson (representing Northern Virginia), and Nicole S. Terry (representing Southwest Virginia).

The first job fair took more than a year to plan. But the Co-Chairs agree it was well worth it. On August 18, 2007, the first VBA YLD "Diversity Recruitment Job Fair" brought together 125 students and twenty employers. Since then, two more Job Fairs have taken place. At the most recent on August 15, 2009, fifteen employers participated, and 140 students registered, of whom 100 interviewed.

The Logistics

Employers sign up first. In 2007, employers were asked to pay a fee of \$500 each to interview students. Given the recession, the Committee lowered the employers' fee this year to \$350. Students are then asked to sign up—three to four months in advance—by submitting a resume, transcript, brief statement regarding their contribution to diversity, and ranking the prospective employers.

Each interview slot is twenty minutes. In 2007, the slots were assigned by lottery. After the 2007 Job Fair employers suggested that the Committee allow them to set criteria. The Committee responded by assigning some slots by lottery but reserving the rest for students meeting the employer-imposed criteria.

Show Me the Money

The ugly truth is that you can't do it without money. The 2009 Job Fair cost about \$13,500, which included costs for the location, advertising, vendors, and lunch for both employers and students.

That's why in addition to employer registration fees, the Committee "allows employers to sponsor the job fair to offset their costs," explained Elaina Blanks. The Committee created four sponsorship levels: Platinum, Gold, Silver, and Bronze. This year there were twelve sponsors, all of which were firms. Interestingly, law firm sponsors did not necessarily participate as employers. They did it to express their commitment to diversity even when they did not have job openings for students.

Where for-profit employers pay \$350 each, nonprofit employers attend free of charge. The total funds breakdown in 2009 was \$7,500 from sponsorships, \$4,900 from private employers, and \$1,450 from the VBA budget. In addition, VBA staff provides invaluable support, helping to coordinate, assisting the Committee, and attending the Job Fair for on-the-ground support.

Recruiting Recruiters

The Committee marketed the Job Fair at an earlier on-campus interview. "YLD members of the VBA have ties to a number of law firms. We strongly encouraged these firms to participate the first year," Monica McCarroll commented. "Nobody knew what they were getting into," she added, "so it was a leap of faith. But since then, there have been a lot of repeat customers."

In addition to repeat customers, the Job Fair is seeing increased interest from small firms.

Finding Candidates

VBA YLD has strong relationships with Virginia law school career services. It put those relationships to good use by asking the various Career Services Deans to promote the event to their students. In addition, the Richmond Area Recruiters Association has representatives from employers and the law schools who were very helpful in promoting the Job Fair. Finally, the Univer-

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sity of Virginia added the VBA YLD Diversity Job Fair to its listserv, further spreading news of the event. In fact, out-of-state students with ties to Virginia attend the Job Fair regularly. Karen Robinson explained that there is only one criteria for students, they have to be a rising 2L or 3L student. The diversity criteria are extremely broad.

The Challenge

When asked about the greatest challenges, McCarroll answered, "Logistics, and the actual matching process. It is challenging to find a way to match people and make it a worthwhile venture."

Dana Dews agreed: "Particularly the first year; that was very difficult. Because you have a group of attorneys who are not at all involved in the career services area who are trying to schedule vendors, match students, and so on." The Committee added that at times it is difficult to juggle the event and their full-time jobs. In fact, in an attempt to find a better match for the Committee, the Co-Chairs have changed the vendors who do the matching each year. As Dana Dews said: "This entails a whole process of figuring out what you want, and what you want the end result to be."

What Lies Ahead

Of course, the Committee plans on organizing another job fair next year. But in the meantime, there's no rest. Committee members are already organizing a webinar and panel for September. The webinar will have attorneys in Virginia critiquing resumes and cover letters in real time. The panel will provide interviewing tips as well as resume and letter-writing advice. Of course, these tips can then be applied to the 2010 Job Fair.

For more information, visit www.vba.org/diversityjobfair.htm.

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