

## Pushing Diversity Doesn't Ensure Success For Women Attys

By Kali Hays

*Law360, New York (October 20, 2016, 9:54 PM EDT)* -- Female attorneys continue to struggle to make strides in BigLaw, especially once they move beyond the junior associate level. But leading supporters of diversity in the industry said at a Thursday panel discussion that there are steps women can take to help them move up the legal ladder.

Meeting at the New York offices of Mayer Brown LLP, leaders in law and diversity research brought up a number of ways law firms could and should support their female associates during a panel co-hosted by the ABA Journal aimed at parsing out the trend of women leaving the practice of law. However, all agreed that women individually cannot expect to be propped up by a given firm's push toward inclusiveness.

While the panel also agreed that institutions like law firms should of course be required to take diversity seriously, Nate Saint-Victor, executive director of legal compliance for Morgan Stanley, said the topic of diversity would be undercut without pointing to the singular obligation each woman has to ensure her own success.

"Simply put, if you individually are not committed to your success, you have an expectation that you're organization is going to continue to invest in you and develop you and propel you to that leadership position that you deserve, but you're doing nothing individually to support that, I think that's a myopic perspective," Saint-Victor said.

He said he recommends young female attorneys hoping to get to the top of a firm spend their own time and money on professional development conferences and executive coaches the way they bought expensive textbooks and treatises during law school, which were used to get a leg up the competition.

"We did things to be the best and get the best opportunities," Saint-Victor said. "We should be reflecting on how are we doing that now, as associates, as partners hoping to make equity partner, are we investing our own dollars into [ourselves]."

Panel moderator Arin Reeves, a researcher and writer on leadership and inclusion and also president of research and advisory firm Nextions, said a lack of diversity in law is "not about being a woman" but rather about an underrepresented group in an industry that simply didn't consider needs outside those of its initial builders.

In explaining this notion of “depersonalizing” law’s lack of diversity, Reeves pointed to nursing, a female-dominated industry she’s researching and consulting with regarding its exclusionary culture toward men.

“Depersonalization is a key success factor in a lot of the successful women we’ve come across in research,” Reeves added. “[They said] this needed to be done, I did it, then I fixed it when I got more power, and then they went back and made sure it wasn't done like that again.”

Nevertheless, the panel recognized that the structural and cultural hurdles women in law come up against are still causing them to leave the practice at a rate that hasn’t improved for more than a decade.

Lisa M. Ferri, Mayer Brown’s New York intellectual property practice leader and co-chair of its global women’s leadership committee, said that to make changes women essentially need to be in positions of power within a firm, through partnership or having a big book of business, but they’re generally not getting the development needed to reach those levels.

The very way in which business is often developed, with white male partners speaking with white male corporate officers handing out work, is an issue that Ferri said needs to be worked out sooner rather than later.

One approach Mayer Brown is using is to build up diversity directly through its business, namely by getting partners to create more diverse working groups, which is intended to familiarize clients with more diverse types of attorneys. This, Ferri said, will hopefully steer clients away from an ingrained habit of choosing to work with counsel that they outwardly relate to.

“People tend to work and associate with people that are like them, and we’re trying to break into that,” Ferri said, “to build it through the business.”

--Additional reporting by Matthew Guarnaccia. Editing by Brian Baresch.