

Littler Program Promoting Diverse Associates Sees Some Success

By **Nell Gluckman**

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Minorities made up 7.53 percent of equity partners at law firms surveyed by the Minority Corporate Counsel Association in 2014, the most recent year for which data is available, though they accounted for nearly 30 percent of those accepted as summer associates.

To address this gap, Littler Mendelson has launched a diversity program for associates that seems to be showing some results. When the program launched in 2013, one-quarter of the 22 participating associates left the firm.

In 2014 and 2015, that number dropped below 10 percent, said Littler partner Natalie Pierce, who spearheaded the program and is co-chair of the firm's robotics, AI and automation industry group.

Like many firms, Pierce noticed that Littler was losing talented associates, particularly women and minorities, to in-house positions. As co-head of the firm's diversity and inclusion council, she designed the program to try to retain them.

"The goal is to keep and promote those associates," Pierce said. "What I can say from my experience is that I know how powerful it can be to have an advocate."

So far, seven associates who were in the program have been promoted to partner. They made up 40 percent of the firm's class of new partners this year, Pierce said.



Littler Mendelson associate Shella Neba.

Littler's program pairs senior associates who have already proven themselves as standout lawyers with the firm's top partners and general counsel at several client companies. The goal is for successful attorneys to help these associates gain extra business development skills and connections that will push them over the edge and into the firm's partnership ranks.

Shella Neba, an associate in Littler's Atlanta office, was paired with Minneapolis-based partner Marko Mrkonich, a former president and managing director of the firm. She said he's had suggestions for how to develop business that she wouldn't have thought of on her own.

For example, when Neba was getting a pitch ready for a client, she knew she wanted someone

with industry expertise on her team to staff the case. She called Mrkonich cold to ask for suggestions, and he started brainstorming with people at Littler who had not only that expertise, but also went to the same college or worked at the same prior firm as the client.

“My book of business has at least tripled since I’ve been in the program,” said Neba. She got the case, which she did not name, and is now up for partner this year.

Mishell Parreno Taylor (pictured right), another participant who was paired with Mrkonich, said that he helped her put together the business plan she needed to present when being considered for partner last year.



Born in Ecuador, Taylor said that her focus is to help clients manage multicultural and multilingual work forces. Mrkonich helped her figure out how to get the word out to clients, and she made partner.

“I don’t have lawyers in the family,” said Taylor, who works out of Littler’s San Diego office. “Being at a big firm was a new experience.”

Pierce said that a key to Littler’s diversity program is that the partners in the advocate position are all either rainmakers, practice group leaders or board members. When those people get behind a younger lawyer, it can change their career.

“It just doesn’t happen as naturally for diverse attorneys,” she said. “It’s sometimes maybe just a matter of an older white male not feeling as comfortable approaching a younger female or diverse attorney, not because they don’t want to.”Pierce added that once the successful partner is given a framework within which to mentor someone, they welcome the opportunity. The program also pairs associates with general counsel working at companies that Littler counts as clients.

N. Cornell Boggs III, senior vice president and general counsel at manufacturing giant Dow Corning Corp., worked with associate-turned-partner Edward Chyun (pictured right), who



works out of Littler’s Cleveland office. Boggs is based in Midland, Michigan, but he introduced Chyun to his general counsel contacts in Cleveland.

“You get access to the GCs who are running the legal teams of companies and hear what they expect from outside counsel,” Chyun said. “This program lets you know that you’re a good lawyer, and you can succeed here.”

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