

Diversity and inclusion now an indispensable part of doing business

By [Lerisha Naidu](#)

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The realisation of true diversity and inclusion is a marathon exercise without any manifest overnight fix - and rightly so because its achievement must be meaningful rather than just quantitative. In continuing to advance this project, there is an obligation on everyone who can pay something forward to do so - to empower others with skills and opportunities, to make an effort to include, to share wisdom and to influence positively. I am proud to be part of a firm that identifies diversity and inclusion as high on its list of priorities. There is an awareness of what is undoubtedly a long-haul project and there is a clear tone from the top.



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One of the key challenges law firms in South Africa face is ensuring that the industry continues to transform, achieving both diverse workforces as well as inclusive cultures that foster talent, and empower junior black and female lawyers in particular to persevere in the profession. Formulating a deliberate and realisable strategy to ensure meaningful diversity and inclusion and setting targets against which performance of the business and of its leaders are measured on this score are key ways in which this can be addressed. In addition, all players in the legal industry should be encouraged to participate in the D&I dialogue, embedding it into the collective industry culture.

The higher number of female law graduates in South Africa (according to the Law Society of South Africa - in 2016 there were 2601 female LLB graduates as opposed to 1865 male LLB graduates), hopefully implies that the law firm landscape in South Africa will, over time, yield an increasing number of female leaders, as more and more female lawyers work up the ladder, assuming leadership roles. Central to their retention is an adequate inclusion and empowerment strategy.

As part of the firm's Diversity & Inclusion initiative, Baker McKenzie has set aspirational targets for gender, that focus on increasing female representation in partner and leadership roles. The firm announced in June 2019 that it had set new global aspirational targets at 40:40:20 percent gender diversity, to represent 40% women, 40% men and 20% flexible (women, men or non-binary persons). This target applies to partners, senior business professionals, firm committee leadership and candidate pools for recruitment.

Globally, nearly 40% of the firm's 3,800 lawyers are women. In South Africa, around 61% of the firm's staff is female. To empower female leaders, the firm has implemented an intensive mentorship programme to support and help female lawyers

rise through the ranks of the firm so that they can take up leadership positions in the future.



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In my own legal career, I have been influenced by not only formidable female leaders but also male leaders that have propagated gender diversity initiatives just as passionately. This bears testimony to the UN HeforShe Campaign, which our firm wholeheartedly supports.

Diversity and inclusion has become an indispensable part of doing business. Staffing matters with diverse teams enables the weighing in of diverse perspectives and an overall enhanced service to consumers of legal services. Diversity, inclusion and meaningful transformation is not only the right thing to do, but is also integral to business success, particularly in light of local empowerment imperatives and employment equity objectives. A D&I programme breeds creativity, encourages a greater range of views and helps lawyers to respond better to the needs of its clients and the communities in which they work. Quite simply, the sustainability of the large law firm model relies on D&I being central to its strategy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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