

Breaking Barriers: A New Push for Disability Inclusion in U.S. Law Firms



A recent report from the National Association of Law Placement (NALP) sheds light on the stark underrepresentation of attorneys with disabilities in U.S. law firms. Merely 1.4% of law firm lawyers identified as having a disability, according to the 2023 NALP report. Although this figure is a notable increase from the 0.6% reported in 2019, the statistical significance is so marginal that NALP refrained from drawing any conclusive long-term trends. The alarmingly low representation contrasts sharply with the national average, where 21% of the U.S. working population identifies as having a disability, as emphasized by Caren Ulrich Stacy, CEO of Diversity Lab.

The Call for Change

In response to this glaring disparity, Diversity Lab, an organization dedicated to promoting diversity and inclusion within law firms and legal departments, has launched the Disability Inclusion Commitments. This initiative, announced on Tuesday, has garnered support from over 90 law firms across the U.S., UK, and Canada.

The Commitments

Law firms signing the pledge commit to various measures, including the removal of physical and digital barriers affecting lawyers with disabilities, an increase in the hiring of disabled individuals, and the implementation of annual surveys allowing employees to self-identify as disabled. These commitments, although voluntary, mark a crucial step toward fostering a more inclusive legal landscape. Diversity Lab plans to monitor and evaluate firms' progress through surveys and sharing sessions.

Overcoming Reluctance

One significant challenge faced by attorneys with disabilities in law firms is the reluctance to self-identify due to the fear of judgment from colleagues or clients. Caren Ulrich Stacy highlighted this issue, underlining the importance of creating a supportive environment where individuals feel comfortable disclosing their disabilities.

Champions of Change

Leading law firms, including Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom; Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe; and Mayer Brown, have joined the cause. These firms have committed to working toward one or more of the ten steps identified in the pledge throughout 2024.

Seeking Concrete Steps

While acknowledging the positive aspects of the Diversity Lab program, Haley Moss, an attorney with autism who consults on inclusion matters, urges for more concrete steps. Moss emphasizes that systemic barriers to disability inclusion within the legal profession need comprehensive and tangible solutions.

The Context of Change

Diversity Lab's initiative coincides with a broader shift in law firms' diversity programs, focusing on recruiting and retaining attorneys of color, primarily Black and Latino lawyers. This shift comes in response to a U.S. Supreme Court decision in June that terminated affirmative action in universities. Some law firms, including Perkins Coie and Winston & Strawn, have faced legal challenges from conservative groups over their diversity programs.

A Historical Focus

Diversity Lab, known for promoting racial diversity initiatives in law firms, has dedicated the past four years to addressing the inclusion of disabled attorneys. The formation of a Disability Advisory group one year ago underscores the organization's commitment to driving lasting change in this crucial aspect of legal diversity and inclusion.

Don't be a silent ninja! Let us know your thoughts in the comment section below.

