

## 5 big ideas — track diversity numbers

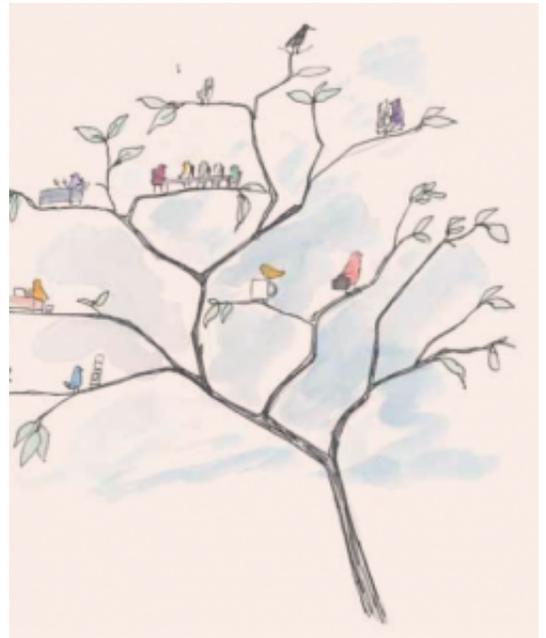
Law firms need to make a public commitment to diversity

BY JASON LEUNG

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[http://lawandstyle.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/63\\_24\\_bigideas.png](http://lawandstyle.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/63_24_bigideas.png)Of any minority group, lawyers from Asian backgrounds in private practice in the U.S. have the lowest chance of eventually making partner. Don Liu, general counsel for Xerox Corporation, told me this two years ago at a conference in Detroit, which I was attending in my capacity as the president of the Federation of Asian Canadian Lawyers. I was surprised to hear this sobering piece of information, but I was also impressed that my colleague had enough detailed statistics to back up this fact.

In Canada, it also seems that people of Asian descent and other visible minorities entering law firms are less likely to eventually become partners. I have spoken to many senior lawyers who have observed a high rate of attrition for lawyers from diverse backgrounds at law firms and corporate legal departments. But it is all anecdotal. We don't know for sure who's leaving, and when.



American federal law requires that every employer with more than 100 employees report workforce data. All I need to do is a quick internet search and I can find race and gender demographics for any large American firm, even at the partnership level. In Canada, when I hunt for stats, I am only able to find a couple of university studies. These reports provide useful information, such as the fact that just 11 percent of the general population of lawyers in Ontario were visible minorities in 2006. However, there are no up-to-date, national figures that encompass law firms of all sizes, and that can be compared to other professions and nations.

Having a highly developed set of race and gender demographics would help us identify areas that are most lacking in diversity. We could then set targets for change and hold people accountable for making that change. We're lawyers: we are motivated by numbers via billable hours. Diversity statistics would really push us.

In order to come up with better demographic data, we need to work together. Ethnic bar associations need to encourage firms and corporations with legal departments to keep track of and report diversity statistics and to pressure other industry organizations to support these actions. Furthermore, these associations need to identify strong candidates within their own communities for leadership positions and provide them with support and mentorship. Law firms need to make a public commitment to diversity at the partnership and leadership levels. Firms and corporations that are diverse at the highest levels will have a broader range of ideas and perspectives to call upon and adapt, while those that aren't diverse could be left behind. Just how much will diversity impact the bottom line in coming years? We'll never know until we start counting.

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Illustration by Graham Roumieu