

INTERVIEW

With John Latham, Diversity Partner at Alston + Bird LLP

John Latham is the Diversity Partner at Alston & Bird LLP in Atlanta. Last November, Alston & Bird held its first ever Asian American Attorney Forum in Atlanta and approximately 30 lawyers from all of the firm's offices attended. Ashley Liu Kirkman and Melissa Hsieh, both associates at Alston & Bird, recently had the opportunity to talk with Latham about the forum and other items of interest to Asian American attorneys at Alston & Bird.



John L. Latham

Prior to having the Asian American Attorney Forum, what were your expectations?

I thought it would be a good opportunity to get the Asian American lawyers together to get to know each other and form a sense of community. That was one of the things we had hoped for and I think that was achieved, although it's definitely an on-going goal. Also, I wanted to make sure that we made management aware of the depth and breadth of our Asian lawyers. I think that was also achieved. Finally, I wanted to see if there were specific issues that were impacting our Asian lawyers that the firm needed to address.

Did the forum meet your expectations and/or would you suggest any changes for future years?

It did meet my expectations. More importantly I hope the attendees were pleased with the event. If I had to change anything I would expose our managing partners to a different portion of the forum. For example, this year they joined us for a discussion about the possible changes that should take place at the firm. In the future I would like them to hear the ideas and enthusiasm surrounding the experiences and benefits of being an Asian American lawyer at Alston & Bird.

Have you had any follow-up meetings with anyone after the forum?

Yes, we've had several. First, the managing partner and I had a meeting with a few attorneys to discuss some issues surrounding Asian American lawyers that have an "Asian" practice (their work is focused in China or in other Asian countries). Second, we asked Kevin Lyn to give a report to the Diversity Steering Committee regarding his experience at the GAPABA Conference in Los Angeles. Finally, I have had several one-on-one conversations, particularly with other partners, encouraging them to step up and mentor our Asian lawyers.

Do you think the firm supports the action items identified at the forum, such as an increased level of mentoring for Asian American lawyers?

Sure. I definitely think there is an argument that a lack of formal training or mentoring may more heavily impact diverse lawyers since they may not be able to find mentors as naturally as non-diverse lawyers. However, I also believe that this is a case by case situation based on the individual. Having said that, we do need to focus on mentoring and training. In fact, the hiring partner, Liz Price, and several others are working on this, particularly on training for senior associates that will help bridge the gap between being an associate and a partner.

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Another issue identified at the forum was the lack of representation of Asian lawyers in firm leadership. Similarly, due to the lack of senior Asian lawyers, do you think it is necessary that we have a “leader” amongst our group to ensure our voices are heard?

I like champions. I think it is always helpful if you have somebody who says I think this is important and I want to drive it. I think the Asian lawyers have already benefited from Kevin Lyn’s voice. For example, if you think back two years ago before he started speaking up on behalf of Asian lawyers there wasn’t really a lot going on. It was Kevin who came to us with the idea of the forum so I think he is a champion within the firm, but certainly not the only one. I am hopeful that the forum will spur other people to step forward, whoever those natural leaders may be.

What is the firm doing, if anything, to recruit Asian lawyers?

We try to make practice group leaders and partners aware of the habit of gravitating towards people like them and remind them to look at a broader pool of qualified individuals. We also make it clear to our recruiters that we are very open to bringing in diverse lawyers. While we don’t have quotas and we don’t make race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation criteria for hiring, it’s a matter of simply being aware of our hidden biases.

What do you believe are the issues facing Asian attorneys, if any?

As discussed at the forum, Asian lawyers sometimes suffer from a stereotype that they are bright individuals that can do the work at the associate level but may not be able to transition into leadership roles or managing client relationships. Asian lawyers can also be characterized as being deferential and hesitant to challenge others’ ideas, especially in group settings. If someone fits this stereotype (and all Asian lawyers certainly do not), I think they should try to push themselves outside of their comfort zone. Likewise, partners and practice group leaders should recognize that this trait is not necessarily indicative that the person doesn’t have good ideas or doesn’t want to contribute to the group, and the partners should attempt to provide the individual with an environment where they feel comfortable speaking up.

In your opinion, what can an associate at our level do to step out of that stereotype you just described without appearing overly aggressive?

I would sit down and talk to your practice group leader. Tell him or her that you want to ensure that you have a good career at the firm and ask for their support. Identify the areas in which you’d like to focus, and in turn, ask them to tell you what areas they think are important. It’s a two-way street.

The diversity initiatives and events at our firm typically have a high rate of participation from our minority attorneys. However, our non-minority attorneys typically do not participate in these events even though they are open to everyone at the firm. What are your thoughts on this?

Unfortunately, there is an element of truth to what you’ve said. We need everybody to be a believer and to participate – not just those that are already diverse or those who have some diversity management role. The fact of the matter is that sometimes it’s hard to get people involved who really need to be involved. That’s just a reality we are going to have to face.

Further, there is a balance to be struck between recognizing, celebrating and finding support among lawyers that are alike, and avoiding a balkanization so that we have the Asian lawyers of Alston & Bird, the African-American lawyers of Alston & Bird, etc. We are all Alston & Bird lawyers and while we don’t require assimilation in some ways, I still want everybody to feel like they are part of Alston & Bird rather than as a sub-set of our great firm. ■