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Study: In-House Minority Women Face Obstacles, but Feel Empowered

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April 15, 2011

CORPORATE COUNSEL Women of Color, a nonprofit organization that fosters diversity in Fortune 1000 law departments, has announced a report on how women of color are faring in those companies. And despite the obstacles faced by respondents, CCWC founder and CEO Laurie Robinson says the results were surprisingly refreshing.

"This group had a very strong sense of self, and they very much felt that they had the power to control their destiny," says Robinson.

CCWC announced the completion of its 80-page report-"The Perspectives of Women of Color Attorneys in Corporate Legal Departments"-at a panel discussion held at the New York Hilton last week.

Information was compiled from women of color across the country during the summer of 2009. The respondents included 857 online participants, 500 attendees of CCWC's Fifth Annual Career Strategies Conference, and 40 focus groups participants. Robinson says the organization has spent the interim period analyzing its research and using the results to develop a guide for the recruitment, retention and advancement of women of color in law firms and corporations.

"There were multiple pieces to it," she says. Even after the preliminary report had been drafted, Robinson conducted a series of interviews in order to interpret the findings and craft them into information that could be useful to both law firms and in-house law departments.

About 55 percent of the respondents indicated that their departments were less than 20 percent diverse. Robinson says that 16 percent said they were the only person of color in their department. But survey respondents found their gender to be more of an obstacle to advancement than their race. Almost 52 percent said that being a woman was a significant barrier, while about 35 percent indicated that race impeded advancement.

Although they were potentially at a disadvantage on both prongs, Robinson says the subjects were not deterred from setting high goals for themselves. "They indicated that they overcame the barriers by doing the very best that they could in their work, by gaining subject matter expertise, and by finding mentors in their department," she says.

Because so many in-house attorneys started their legal careers at law firms, Robinson says CCWC was "able to capture the benefit of being able to compare the two experiences." She found that 67.2 percent of women of color preferred the corporate environment to law firm work with respect to the atmosphere of inclusion.

Corporations often offer more opportunities for interaction with clients and senior management, says Robinson. Respondents reported wanting to be part of the team, she says, and they found the corporate legal environment more conducive to achieving a feeling of inclusion.

"Being valued" was rated the number one factor in current job satisfaction. The respondents said they felt valued when they received feedback for their work and rewards for jobs that are well done. They also appreciated having autonomy in managing work and being provided with opportunities for professional growth.

"They want to have a seat at the table," says Robinson. Other factors in weighing job satisfaction were compensation, challenging work assignments, flexible work arrangements, and upward mobility.

"This report is saying to companies, 'You've got a pipeline of people who could easily be your leaders,'" says Robinson. She says department leaders can further build that pipeline through developing talent within their own departments and by partnering with outside firms that staff high-level matters with diversity in mind.

A spokesperson for K&L Gates, the lead sponsor of the report, said in an e-mail to CorpCounsel.com: "K&L Gates is proud to be the principal sponsor of the research, and we commend CCWC for undertaking this ground breaking study on the

experiences of women of color working in corporate legal departments."