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# Two Law Firms Paving the Way in South Carolina and Beyond

By Rebecca Baumgartner, Kimya Johnson, and Michelle Wimes (Ogletree Deakins); and Janie Langdale and Beth Richardson (Robinson Gray Stepp & Laffitte, LLC)



With the events of this past year impacting all areas of our lives, the need for connection, empathy, and inclusion is stronger than ever. Our communities and workplaces are made up of people with diverse perspectives facing unique challenges. As the emphasis on diversity and inclusion continues to grow, law firms are in an exciting position to lead and propel this force forward. Two law firms in South Carolina are making strides, and they have shared insights into their strategies and the progress made so far.



## Ogletree Deakins: Innovating Its Approaches to Diversity & Inclusion

Ogletree Deakins enjoys a long tradition of legal excellence. We are fully committed to the importance of diversity within the workplace and are proud of our record. The firm's diversity and inclusion work is borne through two departments: the Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) Legal Practice Group and the Professional Development and Inclusion Department.



## Ogletree Deakins' D&I Legal Practice Group

In September 2018, Ogletree Deakins formalized a new legal practice group—the D&I Practice Group. It comprises attorneys who each have an expertise that supports our clients in their diversity and inclusion efforts.

D&I is an area of increasing priority for many organizations, including ours. But, in addition to implementing our firm's robust D&I efforts, as workplace legal experts, the firm wanted to be positioned to do this work outside the firm—for our clients. With the addition of the D&I Practice Group, Ogletree Deakins became one of a handful of law firms in the country focused on helping companies realize their D&I goals.

Ogletree Deakins' D&I Practice Group focuses on newly emerging and evolving aspects of diversity

and inclusion law as well as practice. Attorneys help guide companies through the diversity assessment, data collection, D&I metrics or goal setting, and D&I data analysis processes. Attorneys provide legal advice and compliance and risk-reduction counseling that factors in D&I-oriented law. Attorneys assist with the creation of D&I plans, D&I needs assessment or engagement surveys, and D&I program execution, such as affinity group structuring and creating diverse recruiting/hiring plans. Attorneys and expert trainers offer D&I-focused training on subjects such as unconscious bias, launching a D&I initiative, and inclusive leadership.

Over the past two years, Ogletree Deakins' D&I Practice Group has been representing companies across an array of industries in these varied diversity or inclusion-oriented efforts. The firm represents organizations (from startups to Fortune 500, privately held and publicly traded, those beginning a D&I program to those having a sophisticated D&I initiative, and beyond) in the range of legal, compliance, programming, training, and mitigation issues that arise in D&I implementation.

Many companies are seeking support for their D&I initiatives, given how their customers, clients, boards, executive leadership, and society are focused on it. And many lawyers, human resource professionals, and D&I practitioners are receiving more resources and have become more intensely focused on how to recruit, retain, engage, include, and promote their diverse workforce and also meet the needs of an increasingly diverse customer base. There is no shortage of D&I resources in the marketplace. But there are not many lawyers providing D&I legal counseling as well as practical strategic advice. Ogletree Deakins has set itself apart by being that D&I legal resource.



Rebecca Baumgartner is the senior manager of Diversity & Inclusion at Ogletree and is responsible for supporting and driving equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives at the firm. Kimya Johnson is senior counsel and leads the firm's Diversity & Inclusion Legal Practice Group. Michelle Wimes is Ogletree's chief diversity and professional development officer and provides the visionary and strategic direction for the firm's internal efforts. Janie Langdale is director of marketing and a member of Robinson Gray's Diversity Equity & Inclusion ("You2") Committee. Beth Richardson is a partner and leads Robinson Gray's diversity equity & inclusion efforts as chair of the You2 Committee.

## Ogletree Deakins' Professional Development and Inclusion Department

The firm's internal D&I work is well-established, and the firm has been recognized as a law firm leader. The firm has an expansive D&I initiative with a myriad of longstanding programs; however, earlier investments in affinity groups and wellness programs, in particular, have proven to be worthwhile, especially during the current COVID-19 crisis.

Over the past five years, the firm has developed and supported the formation and initiatives of six Business Resource Groups (BRG) aimed at our diverse attorneys. The firm supports each BRG with resource allocation that includes formal and informal mentoring programs, training, professional development, and business development opportunities for its members. The BRGs are an invaluable firm resource and means to increase belonging, connectedness, and success among diverse attorneys. Additionally, the firm leverages its annual shareholder meeting and all-attorney retreat to host biennial retreats for our women and diverse attorneys and events specifically targeted to encourage the growth and cultivation of our diverse attorneys. As a way to encourage individual engagement, the Pledge to Diversity and Inclusion—An Action Plan (DAP) asks each attorney to commit to completing five to seven activities to experience diversity in their everyday lives.

The firm also recognizes the importance of a healthy balance between work obligations and life. We have implemented many programs and benefits to help attorneys achieve greater work-life integration, including formalized remote work and reduced hour policies.

To ease an attorney's transition back to work after paid parental leave (PPL), the on-ramping program was adopted. In addition to up to 16 weeks of wage replacement benefit, this gender-neutral program provides a reduced billable hours requirement without requiring an application or other approval and with no compensation adjustment. Additional supporting resources, including backup child care and a milk stork program, are available to aid in ensuring that returning attorneys can successfully ramp back up to their full productivity. Additionally, Ogletree is committed to promoting, supporting, and sustaining the health and well-being of all of our lawyers and professional staff. We are proud of the pledge we made to support the ABA's innovative and important campaign to improve the health and well-being of those in the legal profession. In addition to reaffirming Ogletree's pledge to support the ABA campaign and to adopt and prioritize a framework for building a culture focused on well-being, the Wellness Pledge page provides important educational opportunities and resources that are available to our attorneys and staff on topics related to well-being, mental health, and substance abuse.

Most importantly, attorneys and staff have seen the firm focus on prevention and taking action. For example, at our last firmwide attorney retreat, for the first time we hosted several wellness sessions, including yoga, meditation, breathing, and stress relief. We had a relaxation lounge where our attorneys could retreat to between sessions, and we served custom mockinis and nonalcoholic beverages during our receptions. We have been hosting Alcoholics Anonymous sessions for our attorneys during the last two retreats as well as a 5K run, through which we have also raised money to combat diseases that have been prominent in our community. We rolled out Midweek Mindfulness events and a two-month weekly webinar series to help

attorneys and professionals cope with recent events. We know that chronic stress and substance abuse are not inevitable. There are actions to be taken—individually and as a firm—that will facilitate the individual and collective ability to make health and well-being a priority. And we plan to continue to do our part.

## Enhancing the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Process: Big Impact From a Small Firm

Robinson Gray Stepp & Laffitte, located in Columbia, S.C., provides business transaction and litigation representation across the state. Known for a commitment to legal excellence and community service, D&I has always been an intrinsic part of Robinson Gray's identity as well. Two of the firm's founding partners—Becky Laffitte and Betsy Gray—are female, and their names appear in the firm's name. Currently, more than 40 percent of our attorneys are female. Over the past few years, Robinson Gray has worked hard to formalize and increase our Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DE&I) initiatives and achieve even more diversity in the workplace.

For small to mid-size law firms like Robinson Gray (currently with 32 attorneys), any formal DE&I initiative can be daunting. Fortunately, companies of all sizes can do their part, and smaller firms can often make impactful changes quickly. Robinson Gray has certainly taken culture-changing steps in a short period of time.

### Internal Implementation

Strong leadership and firmwide buy-in are vital components of any successful work endeavor. In 2017, D&I was chosen as one of four facets of Robinson Gray's overall strategic plan, and for the first time in the firm's history, it became part of the annual budgeting process. In early 2018, Robinson Gray formed a DE&I committee, with members representing every level of Robinson Gray. The initiative was formally kicked off in 2018 at Robinson Gray's attorney retreat, where DE&I was a main focal point of the agenda. We arranged for talent management leader and D&I professional Jacquelyn Cranford to lead attorneys in a thought-provoking group discussion regarding DE&I in the workplace. Following the retreat, the committee called on Susan Kuo, dean of diversity and inclusion at the University of South Carolina School of Law, to lead a similar presentation for our nonattorney staff.

Also, in 2018, Robinson Gray named its first DE&I coordinator to help lead the initiative. With guidance from a coordinator and committee leader, the DE&I committee established a three-year strategic plan, including, among other goals: (1) the establishment of an ongoing consulting relationship with a DE&I advisor to help institute transparency around the process, (2) continuing education within the firm regarding DE&I, and (3) participation in DE&I initiatives outside the firm.

### Engaging an Advisor in the DE&I Field

As to the first goal in the three-year strategic plan, Robinson Gray works with Nika White Consulting, a nationally recognized authority on strategic diversity, intentional inclusion, and organizational effectiveness. Dr. White first assessed our current initiatives to help determine next steps using focus groups, one-on-one interviews, documentation analysis, and employee surveys as part of her firmwide assessment. The results gave insight into areas of success and opportunities for growth. Robinson Gray branded the DE&I committee internally as "You2," which reflects the firm's culture and

focus on DE&I. In early 2020, Dr. White returned to lead a day-long strategic planning session with members of the You2 committee.

#### ***Continuing Education Within the Firm Regarding DE&I***

Much like Ogletree Deakins, Robinson Gray recognizes the importance of a healthy work-life balance and promoting a workplace culture that meets its members' diverse needs. With these values in mind, we formalized human resource initiatives by launching a program in 2018 called "WorkWell." WorkWell's mission is to foster an environment where attorneys and staff can all "give, grow, and thrive," and it comprises four main components involving participation by all firm members: health and well-being (Healthy Habits); professional development (Know & Grow); events and relationship-building (Culture Club); and DE&I (You2). WorkWell updates are emailed within the firm in a weekly newsletter, which has been a useful platform for sharing information regarding DE&I.

Another well-received continuing education effort from last year was the "D&I Five." Robinson Gray aired several 3- to 5-minute videos produced by the South Carolina Bar regarding D&I at the beginning of team meetings throughout the year. We also invited the South Carolina Bar's Nichole Davis to follow up on these videos and lead an interactive discussion with lawyers and staff regarding implicit bias. Providing a myriad of opportunities for involvement, connection, and education within the office has helped the firm keep DE&I values front and center to our organization.

#### ***DE&I Involvement and Outreach Outside the Firm***

Just as important as our internal DE&I leadership, training, and education is Robinson Gray's involvement in these issues with others outside the firm. Those on the You2 committee, including Robinson

Gray's managing partner, have prioritized participation in and taken leadership roles in many DE&I efforts.

In 2019, one Robinson Gray attorney presented on D&I in law and business at the South Carolina Bar's SC Leaders Forum, and Robinson Gray's managing partner, an active member of the South Carolina Bar's Diversity Committee, participated in its panel discussion on implicit bias. Another lawyer was selected to participate in the award-winning program, The Riley Institute at Furman's Diversity Leaders Initiative.

Robinson Gray has also been proud to continue its longstanding financial support for and participation with the Black Law Students' Association at the University of South Carolina School of Law and the South Carolina Women Lawyers Association. In addition, we hosted a Friends-Raiser at the Modjeska Monteith Simkins House in Columbia honoring the "Matriarch of Civil Rights activists of South Carolina," and we sponsored the launch of the Columbia City of Women project, an initiative to address the disparity of landmarks named for women in the city.

#### ***The Path Forward***

It is clear that there is no one path forward and no quick fix. Just like Ogletree Deakins, Robinson Gray has learned a lot and made considerable strides in its DE&I initiatives over the past few years, and its journey is just beginning. Policy reviews, recruitment revisions, and continued education are just some of the goals we have in the coming years. Starting with small, incremental steps has helped Robinson Gray set a strong foundation and make fundamental improvements in making our business more representative of the world around us, and we are eager to continue. Whatever your company's size and wherever you are in the process, let's keep moving forward together. ☺



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