

Consumer demand drives corporate efforts to make a diverse workplace

By **Gail Appleson**

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People use some the Dell computers at the Empowerment Exhibit and Career Fair at the National Urban League Conference being held at the America Center.

(Odell Mitchell Jr./P-D)

Consumer packaged-goods companies and retailers in touch with the public every day are among industry groups making the farthest strides in diversifying their workplaces, while law firms are among those lagging behind, according to speakers at the National Urban League's conference this week.

The effectiveness of corporate programs aimed at improving diversity is a key concern of the Urban League, which works toward helping African-Americans enter the economic and social mainstream. The group is meeting at America's Center through Saturday.

One of the panel discussions at the meeting focused on diversity programs, and participants said a key driver is the demand by consumers.

"Our customers want to see people who look like them," said Margot Copeland, executive vice president of Cleveland-based KeyCorp., one of the nation's largest bank-based financial services companies. Copeland was a speaker at the program.

Because of this, companies that "touch the masses" are making some of the greatest advances in diversifying their work force, said Janet Reid, a partner with Global Lead, a Cincinnati-based management consulting firm that specializes in diversity programs.

Consumer packaged-goods companies and retailers are among those, Reid said in an interview after the discussion. She said examples are Procter & Gamble Co. and Limited Brands Inc.

Among businesses at the other end of the spectrum are law firms, though they are making significant efforts to diversify, she said.

"Law firms are a special breed," Reid said. "Recruiting (of minorities) is difficult. Retention is even harder and advancing, particularly (black) women, is even harder."

A study by the American Bar Association's Commission on Women in the Profession released last year showed that

black women experienced stereotyping and harassment, and that they felt passed over for desirable assignments and access to significant billable hours, and felt excluded from networking opportunities.

Meanwhile, minority women constitute 1.48 percent of partners in the nation's major law firms, while minority men account for 3.53 percent of partners, the National Association for Law Placement reported last year.

In a separate interview, Marc Morial, National Urban League president and chief executive, also voiced concern about diversity at law firms. Morial, a lawyer, pointed out that the law profession produces presidents, congressmen, mayors and chief executives.

"Lawyers command great power in this society. While there have been many, many important efforts to create diversity in the legal profession, I think diversity, as far it concerns African-Americans' ability to get hired and move up the ladder at major law firms, is woefully lagging."

He said law firms, like other types of businesses, are being pressured to diversify by clients. In-house counsel at many major corporations, such as Sara Lee Corp. and Wal-Mart Stores Inc., have agreed to consider firing law firms that failed to meet certain criteria.

However, there are special problems in achieving diversity efforts at law firms. One issue is that big law firms place too much emphasis on grades and will only hire students that graduate at the top of their classes, he said.

"Grades are not always the best predictor as to whether someone will be successful in the profession," he said.

The "obsession" with grades stems from attorneys at law firms who want to hire people "just like them" with similar academic credentials and background.

"They call it the mirror-image rule, and you've got to break the mirror image rule," Morial said.