

How Norton Rose Fulbright Doubled Its Black Nonpartner Attorneys

By **Kevin Penton**

Law360 (June 29, 2023, 4:53 PM EDT) -- Norton Rose Fulbright reacted the way many law firms did in the wake of George Floyd's murder in 2020: It developed a committee to examine how it could improve its efforts to attract and retain Black attorneys and staff.

But through the work of its now 3-year-old Racial Equity Council, the firm not only has talked the talk but walked the walk. Since June 2020, the number of Black partners at Norton Rose has increased by 71% to 12 partners, and the number of Black nonpartner lawyers has doubled, according to the firm.

The council — made up of all the firm's Black partners as well as nonpartner attorneys and business services personnel — set several goals, including to enhance the experiences of Black attorneys and staff at the firm, to improve racial equity at Norton Rose and to improve the pipeline from law school to the upper reaches of the firm, said Jamila Mensah, the council's co-chair and a partner with the firm.

The council set in motion changes in how the firm recruits, mentors and supports employees, how it hires from within and how it educates, said Ryan Manns, the council's co-chair and the co-head of the firm's restructuring group.

The changes have positively reverberated through the Black attorneys and staff — which Norton Rose classifies as business services personnel — at the firm, he said.

"It's really empowered a number of our nonpartner lawyers," Manns said. "There's an enhanced sense of belonging. People just really feel seen, in a way that they didn't before."

When Norton Rose sought to improve its recruiting, particularly for its summer associate program that it views as the pipeline for the future of the firm, it didn't necessarily go to a host of new schools or organizations, Mensah said.

Instead, it looked at the schools that it regularly received a lot of applications from and the schools that it rarely received applications from and sought to do a better job with the latter, she said.

At schools such as Texas Southern University's Thurgood Marshall School of Law in Houston, it sought to communicate better to prospective applicants the work that Norton Rose and the council were performing to improve the work lives of Black attorneys at the firm, Mensah said.

And rather than just rely on the firm's word, Norton Rose also worked with summer associates from

those schools to spread the word themselves among their classmates, she said.

During the past three summer associate classes, 17.8% of participants have been Black, which is more than three times the percentage of Black lawyers in the United States, according to the firm.

"What we figured out was that it was not so much that we were not recruiting at [certain] schools, it was really taking a step back from that and seeing what the students really knew and didn't know about the firm," Mensah said.

The council's work also led Norton Rose to develop a subcommittee that examined and ultimately revised how the firm goes about filling business services positions, leading to a more transparent slate of candidates to be considered for jobs, Manns said.

So far in 2023, Black staff compose 15% of the firm's new business services personnel and 17% of those who have been promoted, according to Norton Rose.

The council also set in motion other efforts, such as affinity groups for Black nonpartner lawyers and business services personnel, a speakers' series that provides professional advancement advice for Black firm members and racial equity education for everyone at Norton Rose, and it expanded professional development opportunities and resources for staffers, according to the firm.

When it came time to mentoring, Norton Rose sought to go beyond a conventional mentorship program by partnering so-called proteges with both partner sponsors and with advocates within the firm, Manns said. The combination helps to meet the younger attorneys where they are in their career and assists them in making the needed connections that can make the difference when it comes to matters such as promotions or working in their desired practice areas, he said.

Norton Rose has generally received positive feedback from the program's participants, hearing that their sense of feeling connected and being recognized as individual contributors in the firm and their ability to connect with individuals across offices and teams have all been enhanced, Mensah said.

"We all know that enhanced engagement and connectivity leads to less turnover and to longer careers within a firm," Mensah said. "Every time we bring someone into the firm, we're looking for them to stay as long as we can keep them."

--Editing by Jill Coffey.