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CCWC Celebrates Eighth Year, Diversity Advances Must Continue

The Editor interviews Laurie Nicole Robinson, Senior Vice President and Assistant General Counsel, CBS Corporation and Founder and CEO, Corporate Counsel Women of Color.

Editor: Tell our readers about your background and experience.

Robinson: I started my career in New York. I did a summer internship with the National Football League during my second year in law school and worked with the NFL Labor Management Council, where we represented football teams in arbitrations. I had a case representing the Indianapolis Colts and enjoyed it so much that I decided to pursue a career in labor and employment law. During that summer, I contacted and had informational interviews with both Ronald M. Green of Epstein Becker & Green, P.C. and Susan K. Anderson at CBS Broadcasting Inc.

Epstein Becker & Green offered me a job, and, upon completing law school, I worked in the firm's New York office where I practiced labor and employment law for management. Thereafter, I worked in the New York office of Seyfarth Shaw LLP in the employment group. After being at Seyfarth Shaw for two years, I was sitting in my office when I received a phone call from Susan K. Anderson about a job opening in the labor group at CBS. I applied and got the job. I started at CBS Broadcasting Inc. in 2002 as assistant general counsel. In 2006, I was promoted to vice president, now working for the parent company and reporting directly to Louis J. Briskman, executive vice president and general counsel of CBS Corporation. In 2009, I was promoted to senior vice president



Laurie Nicole Robinson

and assistant general counsel.

Editor: What was your inspiration in founding Corporate Counsel Women of Color (CCWC)?

Robinson: The legal profession has been slowly evolving in the area of diversity. Among those I knew, women of color attorneys in corporations saw few people of color on their jobs and wanted a way to connect with people of similar back-

grounds and experiences. We also were scattered throughout the City so we often did not see or have contact with other diverse attorneys working at other companies, though a small group of us would network at informal dinners.

I collected the business cards of those women and decided to create a directory of women of color working in corporate legal departments. The goal was to create a readily available resource so we could find, reach out and connect with one

Please email the interviewee at info@ccwomenofcolor.org with questions about this interview.

another. I started with approximately 10 names, and within two weeks, through word of mouth about the project, the list grew to 50 names. I remember how amazed I was that we found 50 women of color attorneys in corporations in New York City. Word of mouth about the effort continued to build, and we found about 600 people across the U.S. In 2004, my former employer, Seyfarth Shaw LLP, provided pro bono legal services and helped me incorporate the organization as a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization. Today, CCWC now has more than 2,600 women of color attorneys who work primarily for Fortune 1000 and Forbes 2000 companies around the globe.

Editor: We see you are celebrating your eighth anniversary in 2012. How has the organization evolved?

Robinson: I am so encouraged by the evolution of CCWC, from a small directory to a 501(c)(3). In the process, we transitioned from networking receptions into hosting our own CLE program to benefit law firm associates and in-house attorneys throughout the U.S. We expanded beyond our country's borders to reach and impact women of color attorneys around the globe, in Africa, Asia, and Europe. Moreover, we launched groundbreaking research in "Perspectives of Women of Color in Corporate Legal Departments," which gave a voice to the experiences of women of color attorneys in corporate legal departments. We reached out to the pipeline of aspiring attorneys through our "My Life as a Lawyer" program, which exposes students to the practice of law, and we have awarded \$80,000 in scholarships to date. Finally, our website has grown from one million to two million hits per year. I am proud of all that we have done.

Editor: What are some upcoming CCWC programs that our readers may find of interest?

Robinson: We just launched an intranet career strategies talk show called CCWC Blog Talk Radio to keep the dialogue going on relevant topics during the year, which will lead into our annual conference. Our show airs live once a month at 8:00 p.m. EST, and shows are then available on demand on our website. We did a show featuring Judge Glenda Hatchett

(*Judge Hatchett* show) and Carla Harris (author of *Expect to Win: Proven Strategies for Success from a Wall Street Vet*). We recently presented a show entitled "Pitch Perfect Resume," which provided concrete examples of resume makeovers: one for law firm partners and one for in-house attorneys.

We have had over 1,000 on-demand downloads for our first three shows. It is very exciting. And, what really gets me up in the morning is our soon-to-be-launched *CCWC General Counsel Training Boot Camp and MBA in a Day for Lawyers* in connection with our 2012 8th Annual Conference in Chicago. These programs are designed for our members who are interested in expanding and strengthening their portfolio of knowledge. It also is designed for those who are interested in ascending to senior-level positions.

For more information on all programs, please visit our website at www.ccwomenofcolor.org.

Editor: What programs does CCWC offer to help women seek and achieve professional advancement?

Robinson: In addition to the new programs mentioned above, in the U.S., we host an annual career strategies conference. Past events have been in New York City, Beverly Hills and Las Vegas, and this year, our eighth conference in Chicago will feature topics ranging from the general counsel roundtable and updates from the Securities and Exchange Commission to managing your career.

Internationally, we host a career strategies symposium. Past events have been in London, Paris, Dubai, Singapore and South Africa. This year our event will be held in Sao Paulo, Brazil, and featured topics include Business Opportunities in Brazil, the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act in Brazil and Privacy Issues in South America. Attendees primarily will be from Brazil and Argentina.

Editor: We often hear about women "toiling in obscurity" – doing their jobs well but not getting recognized. Is this a continuing issue?

Robinson: Yes. We hear the classic line: "I am just going to keep my head down and stay under the radar." That line of

thinking is a recipe for irrelevance. In addition to getting their current work done, women should strive to take on stretch assignments at work and innovate by doing what currently is not being done. Externally, they should be an expert in their field by writing in publications and speaking on panels. And with social media, they should be on Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter, sending out occasional tweets at a minimum.

Editor: How are women faring in the in-house role? Is the number of women GCs in Fortune 500 companies on the rise?

Robinson: The Minority Corporate Counsel Association's 2010 study revealed that more women were serving as general counsel in Fortune 500 and Fortune 1000 companies than ever before, with 101 of the Fortune 500 GCs being women – a seven percent increase from 2009. Nearly 15 percent of women GCs at Fortune 500 companies were minorities – the largest percentage since the survey was launched 12 years ago.

Yes, progress has been made but more still has to be done. We must move beyond the "up today, down tomorrow" behavior of these numbers. It is important to not only sustain these numbers but also to increase them significantly going forward. CCWC's "General Counsel Boot Camp" and "MBA in a Day for Lawyers" will help to equip women of color with the skills and knowledge they will need for the next steps in their careers in corporate America – be it senior-level positions in legal or business units.

We have to continue to beat the diversity drum and get more corporations in the habit of diversifying their pool of applicants and being open to hiring women and people of color for these roles. Anastasia Kelly, a DLA Piper partner and former Fortune 500 GC, recently announced the launch of Project 5-165 – a call to action that aims to get 165 women appointed to GC positions in the Fortune 500 within the next five years. These programs and other efforts will help move the needle.

Editor: Last year CCWC launched groundbreaking research on women of color in corporate legal departments. Tell us about the report and some of the key findings.

Robinson: The report surveyed over 1000 women of color who are in-house, with 75 percent having started their careers at law firms. We were able to capture their assessment of the law firm setting versus the corporate setting; perceived barriers; and future goals and aspirations.

Respondents preferred the corporate setting over the law firm setting based on six key areas: (i) interfacing with senior management; (ii) interfacing and working with clients; (iii) quality of work assignments; (iv) atmosphere of inclusion; (v) upward mobility and (vi) training and development opportunities.

Being valued was rated the number one element of current job satisfaction. Compensation ranked second, and challenging work assignments ranked third. Flexible work assignments and upward mobility ranked fourth and fifth, respectively.

Respondents aspired to serve as chief legal officer, division general or head of a business unit.

Editor: Was there anything that surprised you in the findings?

Robinson: Gender was perceived as more of a barrier to advancement than race. Respondents especially felt the gender barriers in connection with compensation structures, advancement and being

excluded from informal networking with men (e.g., golf outings), and after having a baby, when they were viewed as less committed to the job.

Editor: Based on the findings, what are the next steps toward resolution?

Robinson: In 2012, we will bring awareness to the issue of unconscious biases that cause these inequities and of the utilization of diverse talent (assessments have found that minorities are underutilized at firms in their assignments compared to Caucasian men). We have also partnered with the Association of Law Firm Diversity Professionals (which has over 100 law firm members) to improve retention of associates of color at the firms. We have collaborated and put together an Individual Development Plan for Associates. And based on the findings in our reports and recommendations section, we will host a One-Day Conference for Law Firm Associates on April 25, 2012, at the New York Hilton.

Editor: What are the most effective strategies for companies to retain talented and diverse employees?

Robinson: Recruiting and hiring diverse attorneys are good starts but not enough. There also must be an atmosphere of

inclusion, which means giving diverse talent a seat at the table and equal employment opportunity. Based on our survey findings, we know that promotional opportunities, compensation, quality work assignments and training and development opportunities contribute to the retention of diverse talent.

Editor: What are the broader benefits that diversity can bring to an organization? Some believe diversity can be a spark for innovation. What are your thoughts?

Robinson: Diversity is smart business. People who look the same and sound the same will likely think the same. Diversity brings different viewpoints to the process and accelerates innovation outcomes. In addition, the combined buying power (disposable income) of U.S. racial minorities is estimated to rise to over \$2 trillion by 2015. Companies who are not marketing to these groups or developing products for these groups are leaving opportunities on the table. Furthermore, in light of globalization, companies cannot afford to have a homogeneous group sitting around the table thinking of all the ideas and making all of the decisions. If they do, they will miss out.