

Why LGBT Affinity Groups Are More Important Now Than Ever

By **Aebra Coe**

Law360 (November 20, 2020, 5:20 PM EST) -- The coronavirus pandemic has created new challenges and opportunities for law firms' LGBT affinity groups, with hurdles like firmwide budget cuts testing firm leaders' resolve to support the programs, according to panelists at a Friday presentation by the International Bar Association.

But rather than slashing budgets, it is vital for law firm leaders to recommit to LGBT and other diversity and inclusion efforts in challenging times, said Tiernan Brady, global director of inclusion at Clifford Chance LLP. Moments of crisis are an opportunity for leaders to show their commitment to their values, he said.

"This is a moment when your people are watching what happens," Brady said. "If the minute things got tough it got put in a drawer, the reputational damage that will do internally will undo years of work."

Panelists at the presentation of the IBA's Virtually Together Conference included law firm diversity and inclusion leaders and firmwide leaders at firms in the U.S., U.K., Australia, Brazil and Southeast Asia.

The work LGBT affinity groups do is all the more important as the world faces the difficulties of the pandemic, said Morrison & Foerster LLP partner Randy Bullard, who added that his group is both looking inward by working to create a safe and welcoming space internally and outward through advocacy work and community and pro bono work on behalf of homeless LGBT youth and LGBT asylum-seekers.

Additionally, he said, affinity groups of all kinds have become increasingly important when connecting with clients, with members of the groups in many cases making connections with members of affinity groups operating within those clients and helping create new business opportunities for the law firm.

"We can use the affinity network as a business development tool and a connection tool to develop deeper connections with our clients," Bullard said.

While the pandemic has presented challenges, it has also presented opportunities, according to Brady. He said his firm has moved many of its diversity and inclusion programs to an online format, which created an environment that included more participants from all over the globe who might not have otherwise joined together.

"The silver lining of a terrible moment in 2020 was that ability to connect with people maybe in smaller

offices who may feel like the only gay in the village and connect them to this," he said.

Another panelist, Hanim Hamzah, is regional managing partner of the Zico Law network, which operates in 10 Southeast Asian countries including Singapore, Indonesia and Brunei, some of which have laws hostile to LGBT people.

Creating an inclusive space can be tricky in such countries and must be done with skill, care and patience, Hamzah said. Her firm does not have an LGBT affinity group, but has made an effort to create policies that eliminate discrimination in hiring, she said.

Hamzah said she relies on finding out who the "champions" are who share her goals and then working with them in an effort to change the firm's culture.

"As a large firm you have to think about your values and what the best way is to impact change, but at a pace that's adaptable," Hamzah said. "You need clear messaging about why you're doing it and why it's important, and tie it to the values of the firm and what you want to stand up for. These are messages that will resonate, especially with the younger generation that has different thinking about these issues."

In more liberal countries where LGBT oppression is less overt, people may nevertheless not take affinity groups seriously or wonder why they are needed at all, Brady said.

"Sometimes that resistance is hidden and it's murmured," he said. "Some people say, 'That's too sensitive, we don't talk about that here.' Leadership needs to make space for people to talk about it."

--Editing by Alanna Weissman.