

Driving Engagement

An Interview with Melique Jones,
Global Head of Diversity, Inclusion and Talent Pipeline, Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP

EDITORS' NOTE *Melique Jones has worked in various roles in D&I during her 18-year career at Skadden and prior to that she was involved in marketing, communications and business development. Before joining Skadden, she held communications roles at The Wall Street Journal and its parent company, Dow Jones & Co. Jones received her B.A. in journalism from New York University and her J.D. from Brooklyn Law School.*



Melique Jones

FIRM BRIEF *Founded in 1948, Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP and affiliates (skadden.com) is widely considered one of the world's most highly-respected law firms. Skadden has 22 offices, approximately 1,700 attorneys and more than 50 distinct areas of practice. The firm's clients include approximately 50 percent of Fortune 250 industrial and service corporations, as well as financial and governmental entities, startup companies and non-profits.*

Will you discuss Skadden's commitment to diversity and inclusion and its initiatives in this regard?

Our firm is incredibly diverse and building on that profile is important to us. We are also committed to fostering a workplace culture that stimulates a sense of belonging and a commitment to excellence among all of our attorneys and professional staff. Inclusiveness is foundational to our collaborative, team approach to serving our clients.

Leveraging our diversity starts with cultivating an inclusive work environment in which respect and collegiality are expected, all so that our employees feel welcome and engaged at the firm, both professionally and socially.

Our D&I strategy centers on attorney hiring, retention, professional development and advancement. One of our most successful D&I hiring initiatives is the Skadden 1L Scholars Program, introduced in 2012. Each 1L Scholar works at the firm as a summer associate and also spends part of their summer in the in-house legal department of a firm client. The program provides talented law students with what we call "the ultimate summer experience" in which they get exposure to law firm and in-house practice.

We have introduced more specific approaches to help achieve one of our most important D&I objectives, which is increased diversity at the senior attorney levels. The emphasis is on access to opportunities

for our associates and counsel. That means taking steps that focus on work assignments, mentorship, sponsorship, executive coaching and client exposure.

We also have implemented many initiatives and policies that are typical in an organization that is committed to D&I. For example, we sponsor affinity networks, provide training programs on inclusive collaboration and mitigating unconscious bias, and communicate about the importance of D&I. Additionally, leaders regularly review key metrics to help assess where we are.

As a practical matter, an effective D&I initiative is not implemented from 30,000 feet. The issues and opportunities related to D&I are global and local and require a very integrated approach within the firm. Our D&I team works side-by-side with colleagues across offices, practices and administrative departments to understand the relevant needs and opportunities within specific areas to determine the appropriate strategy and resources to deploy.

What have been the keys to building such strong employee engagement at Skadden?

One key driver of engagement at the firm is the reputation we have earned for our dedication to our clients and the interesting and diverse profile of matters in which we are involved – thanks to our tremendously talented team of attorneys.

Another important driver of engagement is clarity around our core values – acting with integrity and high ethical standards, treating each other with collegiality and respect, giving back and being inclusive.

In fact, our commitment to diversity and inclusion is one of the most significant drivers for engagement at our firm.

We strive to back up the words with action and tangible investments. One example is our affinity network platform. The firm sponsors seven networks across our various offices, each being led by interested associates and counsel.

The networks provide participants with access to leadership development, mentoring and networking that really helps to increase their connectedness to the firm. Even more, each network introduces interesting events and programs that enrich the vibrancy of the larger Skadden community.

Are there strong opportunities for women at senior levels in the industry and will you discuss Skadden's focus on providing opportunities for women to grow and lead at the firm?

While progress on workplace gender equity across all industries has been slow, it is important to recognize the progress that has been made. The path for more women leaders will widen in organizations that are truly committed to D&I, driven by several factors. At Skadden, we are emboldened by the successful women who have blazed trails over the years and set an example for what is possible. Additionally, clients are expecting more diversity on their teams, and newer generations of women and men are entering the profession expecting a level playing field of access to opportunity.

Currently, there are more women in leadership roles at the firm than ever – for example, our Policy Committee, the firm's top governing body, is more than 30 percent women. One of our five global heads of practice is a woman, and 14 of our practice groups are led or co-led by women.

We have been successful, particularly in the past several years, in hiring and retaining associate classes that are at or close to 50 percent women. While sustaining proactive law student recruitment efforts, we are also implementing initiatives aimed at developing, retaining and advancing women attorneys.

Two existing programs that are well received are our women's leadership forum for senior associates and counsel, and a biennial conference for women mid-level associates. Each program helps to convey the firm's commitment and investment in providing equal opportunities for women to develop and progress at pivotal points in their careers.

How critical has it been to have the commitment and engagement from Skadden's senior leadership in the success of its diversity efforts?

The firm's executive partner, Eric Friedman, is extremely committed to and engaged on this topic. It would be impossible to achieve progress without the strong support from him and other leaders at the firm.

In addition to setting the tone and articulating D&I as a priority for the organization, leaders who are credible and effective in this area lead by personal example. They champion diversity on their core teams, create an expansive network of trusted advisors, encourage a range of viewpoints and perspectives to be heard, considered and valued, and address issues with care and integrity.

Those behaviors and attributes empower other leaders and rising talent. For people from still underrepresented backgrounds in the profession, that kind of leadership is a powerful indication that there is a place for them within the organization. ●