

Latham Black Lawyers on Challenging Misconceptions and How Firms Can Help

In a Black History Month special, Law.com International interviewed four London partners at one of the best firms for promoting Black talent to hear their stories and find out what firms can do.

By Hannah Roberts

“When I was a senior associate, I attended a board meeting with a white male colleague who was a trainee. People addressed him rather than me, until I pointed out that I was the lead lawyer on the matter we were there to talk about.”

This is the experience of Linzi Thomas, a Black private equity partner working in the London office of Latham & Watkins.

On another occasion, Thomas says that during a negotiation meeting, someone on the other side gave her their refreshment order while everyone was doing introductions and shaking hands.



David Ziyambi,
Latham & Watkins

“They hadn’t seen that I was also going around doing introductions,” she says. “I was dressed in a suit, like everyone else, not like a catering staff member. It was extremely embarrassing. Why didn’t he think I was one of the legal team?”

Unfortunately, such experiences are not a rare occurrence for Black lawyers, and go to the heart of the challenges the sector faces with regards to improving its track record when it comes to the treatment of Black lawyers.

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At Latham, the firm has spent recent years developing its Black Lawyers Group

(BLG), a global affinity network that aims to establish and maintain relationships between Black lawyers at all levels of the firm.

As well as Thomas, the group classes a number of London partners as members, including Latham’s global private equity vice chair Kem Ihenacho, the global co-chair of the firm’s Africa practice Clement Fondufe, and finance partner David Ziyambi.

The group runs ‘101 sessions’ for trainees to learn from junior and senior lawyers’ experiences and ask questions without fear of judgment, and this year has introduced layered mentoring, through which



Clement Fondufe,
Latham & Watkins

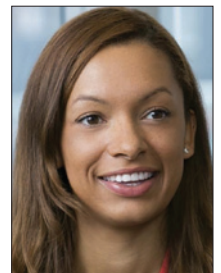
BLG members undertake an informal mentoring programme to connect with another BLG member two or three years their junior.

Role Models

For all four partners, the fact that there are so many senior Black lawyers within the partnership is testament to the firm’s commitment to promoting Black talent. They believe role models are key to showing younger lawyers that progression is possible.

According to research by Law.com International, Latham is one of just two firms for whom the percentage of its U.K.

partnership made up of lawyers from a Black, Asian or other minority ethnic background is close to 20%, reflective of the national population. The rankings also found Latham has the third-highest proportion of Black lawyers in the U.K.



Linzi Thomas,
Latham & Watkins

“No matter how much a firm is committed to diversity, you have to be able to see yourself in someone else you work with,” Thomas says.

A novel aspect of the BLG is that it is run and managed by associates, with partners offering their expertise and guidance when needed. Such an offering puts associates in control of their own futures and allows them to affect change in the upper echelons of the firm, the group impress.



Kem Ihenacho,
Latham & Watkins

“The associates lead the way on things, and they have real sway over the direction the firm takes on these things,” says Thomas. “The reality is that we are taking live instructions from associates on what to do, and that in itself has increased the appeal of the firm to young Black lawyers — there are very visible signs that people’s views

are being taken into consideration at the top of the business.”

The group has grown rapidly in London over the past five years, from eight members in 2015 to nearly 50 now, and has helped several Black lawyers progress to take on senior positions within the firm.

Such growth recently won the BLG the award for diversity innovation with an ethnicity focus at the 2020 Legal Innovation Awards. Judges said that it was “great to see such a good initiative” for Black lawyers within the firm.

Speaking Up

But despite the improving numbers, speaking up on issues regarding race as an individual can still be very hard, Ziyambi points out, and law firms should be proactive about the messaging they put out about such events as the killing of George Floyd in the U.S. and the subsequent re-focus on the Black Lives Matter movement.

Latham was one of many firms to put out supportive statements about the movement on both sides of the Atlantic. Ziyambi says that this can take the pressure off individual lawyers to speak about such matters that could hinder their progression.

“Putting the emphasis on the firm to circulate something that is relevant to BLM or similar issues is really helpful. Sometimes, as a Black lawyer, you feel that if you do address these issues publicly, there is a stigma attached to you, and then if you don’t progress in your career, you can’t help but think to yourself, ‘Is it because I spoke up?’”

Africa co-head Fondufe credits the firm as having gone out of its way to create a comfortable environment for Black lawyers.

“Sometimes I worry that we fall into complacency here at Latham, because you can simply forget about the fact that you even are a Black lawyer,” he says. “You feel so welcome and can articulate your concerns to people so well without thinking that you are going to be judged because of the colour of your skin.”

But Fondufe also recalls his own experiences of being stereotyped at the beginning of his career. “I had just gotten to New York in September 2001 to start my first legal job,” he explains. “I walked around, introducing myself — I was a bright eyed lawyer who’d just left Harvard, I couldn’t wait to meet everyone.”

“Then I walk into this office to introduce myself to someone, and he turns around, looks at me, and says, ‘Oh don’t worry, the computer is fixed now’.” He assumed I was the guy they’d called to fix a computer. When I explained who I was, he just put his head in his hands and sighed, he was embarrassed.

“I don’t hold it against him at all, but it just goes to show what it was like back then for a young Black lawyer.”

Thomas adds that the group also focuses on intersectionality, an issue that can often be overlooked in diversity initiatives.

“We try to recognise that the experiences of Black people are not all the same. We want to say to people, you are not a cookie cutter Black lawyer. Your individual experiences and upbringing could be very different from that of another Black lawyer.

“Things like being the first in your family to go into higher education, or class issues... These things really do impact your upbringing.”

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Ziyambi says that his experiences as a junior lawyer and that of current associates are strikingly different.

“I spent probably 70% of my time as a junior lawyer trying to fit in and adapt. The other 30% of my time was spent doing the actual lawyering. But what I couldn’t stop thinking about was that the 30% of lawyering I was doing was actually 100% of what my white colleagues had to worry about.”

“A constant question for me was, how do I fit in and be regarded in the same way as my white counterparts? That took up a lot of my time and energy. We want junior black lawyers to spend 100% of their time lawyering — we don’t want them to waste their time thinking about the rest of it.”

Private equity vice chair Ihenacho, meanwhile, adds that being a BLG mentor is “one of the most rewarding parts of my job”.

“We all have a responsibility to do whatever we can to support and develop a diverse pipeline of talent for the legal profession,” he says. “Being a mentor is a key way to nurture talent and preserve and protect an inclusive culture where every lawyer can flourish.”

Hannah joined Legal Week in May 2018 after finishing her degree at Kingston University. Her areas of focus are corporate, M&A, private equity and restructuring at UK and City-based US law firms.