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Benesch DEI Co-Chair Talks New Strategic Plan

By [Emma Cueto](#) | Nov 24, 2021, 3:38 PM EST ·

Barbara Lum is one of three co-chairs of the newly revamped Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee at [Benesch Friedlander Coplan & Aronoff LLP](#), and one of the people who helped put out a new strategic plan for DEI at the firm.



Barbara Lum

The new plan comes shortly after Benesch Friedlander combined its Diversity & Inclusion Committee and its Women's Initiative into one body, and includes goals to increase diversity in firm leadership, formalize the DEI responsibilities of practice group leaders, and pursue industry certifications, among other goals.

Lum spoke with Law360 Pulse about the firm's diversity work, the process of restructuring its internal diversity organizations, and her view on whether the industry is improving. This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Why did the firm choose to put out a new strategic plan now, and what went into it?

Myself and my co-chairs, Juan Morado and Margo Wolf O'Donnell, we were rolling into these leadership roles about a year ago, and at that time the firm had a separate D&I Committee and a Women's Initiative. Margo was slated to take over the leadership role in the Women's Initiative; Juan and I were going to head the D&I Initiative. And as we started talking, we found that there were some shared goals and the ability to capitalize on some shared resources.

It didn't make sense to have, for instance, a recruiting subcommittee for women and a recruiting subcommittee for the D&I Initiative when there was a lot of overlap in terms of our strategy and thinking. So we started coming up with the idea of merging them.

And then as we worked together, the three of us, we wanted to make sure we were being very intentional about the way that we were planning diversity and inclusion at the firm. So we wanted to come up with a strategic plan that included both the Women Initiative and the Diversity & Inclusion Initiative, and bring it all under the umbrella of DEI.

So it really came out of that collaboration. We could have these joint subcommittees that are looking at the overall retention issues and education issues and outreach and community partnership — and really bringing in attorneys, staff, and leadership. And we've had a great response! I think at last count, we've had over 100 people at the firm engaged in our subcommittees and our Employee Resource Groups.

The thing we wanted to make sure we were doing as a group was being international, setting goals and measurable success metrics that we could benchmark ourselves against year after year — to show progress to ourselves but also the community and our clients.

Trying to merge two separate arms of the effort can be tricky, institutionally. What has gone into making that structural shift?

You know, it wound up being pretty seamless, actually.

It started with Juan and Margo and myself talking about what we foresaw for our groups, and because we were talking so often, we set up a standing call. So every Monday we have a call where we talk about what's upcoming, what we want to do, what we see for the week.

So when we proposed merging these two arms, no one batted an eye. It just made sense. It was, as I said, building on the shared goals, and I think people saw there was a real strategic advantage to the efficiency and making sure that everyone is included in the conversation.

By the time our strategic plan was approved and rolled out, we had basically completed goal #1, to improve our organizational ability to focus on DEI. That included rebranding, combined oversight, merging the subcommittees, and expanding our mandate firmwide and making sure everyone knows there's some momentum around this.

How do you and your co-chairs approach leadership and the role of the committee at Benesch?

I would say our philosophy is really to lead by example. For instance, Margo is at every single Women's Initiative meeting and is the founder of our B-Sharp Initiative — which is a business development tool that supports women in-house attorneys — and we are very lucky to have her.

And it's the same with Juan and myself; everything we do is to make sure we're leading by example.

I think the other thing that's key to our approach is communication. We want to make sure we're the ones meeting with people, out there educating, and in some ways inspiring people in terms of what the firm is doing on the DEI front. We want people to know we're engaged in the community; we're part of these bar associations, we're part of these clients' networks. And we'd love for as many people as possible at the firms and our clients to join us.

One thing we instituted over the past year is that, anytime someone joins the firm, they get an email from the three of us welcoming them to the firm and saying, "Hey, if you are interested in learning about any of our DEI subcommittees or ERGs, just let us know!" And I would say that about two-thirds of our new hires, be they first years or laterals, have met with us over Zoom. I think that really facilitates people feeling this is a place that's welcoming.

What are some areas you guys are focusing on right now?

There's a lot! Under each of the goals we have initiatives and programs. In terms of what I'm most excited about, we're making sure the programming we have in place is sustainable. We have things like our implicit bias training that we just completed for the year two weeks ago.

We would like to get 100% participation across the firm; that's a goal we have.

We're making a firmwide announcement about inclusive pronouns, where our team members will be able to indicate their personal pronouns via the website or their signatures if they so choose. We continue to work with our hiring committee to improve the pipeline of both lateral hires and new hires, and also to provide leadership training.

And we also are participating in the Mansfield Certification this year, which is new for us. We actually did an internal audit to see what we would need to do to pursue Mansfield Certification, and we found that we were already meeting the qualifications. So a lot of our efforts at this point are internally assessing what we're doing and making sure we're capturing the information so that we can get credit for it and make sure that clients know, recruiters know, and our team members internally know.

So it's continuing to educate, and making sure that we continue to improve, that we have diversity at all levels of the firm. There's a lot to do, but I'm excited for all of it.

Where are some areas where you see room for improvement at Benesch, either in terms of the hard metrics or the more difficult-to-quantify areas?

In terms of the hard metrics, we are always looking to improve our recruiting and retention rates. I think that all firms are looking at those, and we are in a war for talent at this point. There's a lot of movement with the great upheaval going on, with people moving around.

But we are making sure that our team members have access to mentorship; we're overhauling our mentorship program. And I think there's always room for improvement in terms of how we make sure people are being mentored and sponsored and promoted and have access to roles that they want and responsibilities they want to develop.

What is your take on where the legal industry is right now in terms of DEI? What's your impression of how things are going more broadly?

I think things are improving incrementally. I get the general sense that across the industry people are really paying attention to DEI.

Maybe those who in the past have heard the phrase "the business case for diversity" or "the business imperative for diversity" have not really internalized it into their business, and I think

there's significant room for improvement in the industry. But I think across the industry, people are really starting to understand diversity, inclusion, and equity are cornerstones to how we should be doing business, and our clients are absolutely paying attention to it and using it to measure us against our competitors and not just paying lip service to it anymore.

It's something that is not just a "nice to have." It's something that we need to be able to use to set ourselves apart from the rest of the field.

--Editing by Alyssa Miller.

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