



Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion
Centre canadien pour la diversité et l'inclusion

Success stories

Blake, Cassels & Graydon LLP

A Canadian case study in diversity and inclusion

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Blake, Cassels & Graydon LLP: A Canadian success story in diversity and inclusion

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Thanks to the teams at Blakes, Cassels & Graydon, client teams at TD Bank Group and BMO Financial Group, and the three pre-law students for talking with us.

Building diversity in business law by changing the look of law for students

As one of Canada's leading business law firms, Blake, Cassels & Graydon has nearly 1,400 employees in offices in Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, Calgary and Vancouver; as well as in international offices in New York, London, Bahrain, Al-Khobar, Beijing and Shanghai. Recognized as a diversity leader, Blakes positions diversity as an asset that strengthens the firm; contributing to the firm's competitive edge with clients. Blakes has been successful with partnerships that capitalize on shared goals of increasing diversity and inclusion within the legal community.

In 2013, Blakes was a founding member of the Law Firm Diversity and Inclusion Network, a collaboration promoting diversity to encourage a culture of inclusion within Canadian law firms and the wider legal profession. Diversity and inclusion programming at Blakes is led by their Diversity & Inclusion Committee which is made up of partners, associates and staff. The programming, which is both employee-centric and externally focused, extends into the firm's culture of mentorship.

We talked with Mary Jackson, Chief Officer, Professional Resources, about how the firm has been increasing their diversity in recruitment through the creation of a Diversity and Inclusion Pre-Law Summer Student Program in partnership with banking clients BMO Financial Group and TD Bank Group. In interviews with her and the legal teams at the banks, we learned how they collaborated through a shared goal of increasing diversity in their talent pipelines to attract students who may not have previously considered a career in corporate law. We also had the opportunity to include students involved in the program in our interviews for a holistic lens on this case study about diversity in the Canadian workplace.

The perception challenge in corporate law

While Blakes has been regarded as progressive and influential about diversity in law and is noted for its women in leadership, Peggy Moss, Director of New Business Development, described a challenge in perception that they and the other corporate legal firms face in increasing diversity in new hires – that diverse university students were not considering legal careers at the big firms. Blakes wanted to reach beyond the groups of students they usually connected with. To build diversity among its lawyers, the firm expanded its outreach at

universities from law students to undergraduate students with an initiative to cast a more inclusive net, attracting diverse students.

While the legal firms traditionally have had intern programs for law students, targeting pre-law students was new. Kari Abrams, Director of Associates, Student Programs and Benefits, described how Blakes organized events at the University of Toronto and York University for the firm to connect with undergrads before they were enrolled in law. The team that went out into the two universities included Blakes lawyers, some of whom were members of the Blakes Diversity Network, clients and alumni. The Blakes Diversity Network, made up of the firm's legal students, associates and partners representing diverse racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds as well as those identifying as LGBT, promotes diversity within the firm and in the broader legal profession.

We interviewed three students who participated in the Diversity and Inclusion Pre-Law Summer Student Program to learn about their experiences. Colleen Milne was a sociology student at Guelph when she was attracted to apply to the BMO & Blakes Indigenous Summer Student Program because it spoke to her as an Aboriginal undergrad who was strongly considering law school but didn't know if business law would interest her. She thought that internship would be a great learning opportunity. Amal Naufer and Sayjon Ariyaratnam were both summer pre-law interns in the Blakes partnership with TD.

Collaborative partnerships

Blakes has close working relationships with the legal teams at BMO and TD, sharing a commitment to diversity and inclusion. Speaking about the pre-law intern initiatives with the teams from both banks revealed a great deal of camaraderie and respect between the lawyers, which contributed to the collaborative aspect of the partnerships.

It was the close relationship between BMO's legal group and Blakes' lawyers that led Manfred (Manny) Lam and Bindu Dhaliwal to reach out to the people at Blakes about developing the joint BMO & Blakes Indigenous Summer Student Program three years ago. At the time, Manny was involved with the Diversity Council of the bank's legal and compliance group (today he is the Canadian chair) and was providing legal support to BMO's Aboriginal Banking Unit when he identified two challenges. Manny was aware that although he could provide the bank with legal guidance regarding customers, there were particular cultural issues and sensitivities to consider when working with the Aboriginal community that went beyond legal knowledge. He envisioned someone in the role who possessed both the required technical legal expertise and a deep understanding of the Aboriginal community.

The second challenge was that although BMO's existing Indigenous internship focused on first-year law students, they were seeing that once Aboriginal students had identified law as a career, the tendency was to specialize in social justice or environmental law as a way to give back to their communities, rather than corporate law. As the bank had been doing business with Canada's First

Nations for 22 years, it was important that their internship program contribute to increased Aboriginal representation within BMO while including a recruitment component within the community.

Manny and Bindu saw an opportunity to evolve their internship program and attract Aboriginal students before they applied to law school. Blakes offered the perfect solution with their pre-law internship program. The law firm also had great presence on campus in the universities which would help the bank reach the students it wanted to encourage.

This was how Colleen Milne and BMO found each other. For Colleen, “It was their commitment to the Aboriginal community that attracted me.” For Blakes, the firm wanted to increase the visibility of aboriginal students in corporate law.

How the program works

Students in both pre-law internships start off doing diversity work with Blakes before moving to the banks’ legal offices. Because they’re not studying law yet, they aren’t involved in case work but are working in the setting. The students we talked with said the immersive experience influenced them towards futures in corporate law that they hadn’t previously envisioned.

Amal Naufur and Sayjon Ariyaratnam both came to intern with TD from Blakes via different routes. Sayjon was one of the first students to participate in the pre-law internship with TD and had been studying criminology and human rights. What interested him was the collaborative aspect of the internship. He knew he wanted to go into law but wasn’t sure if his path was corporate law or perhaps finance-related. After his summer in the program, he changed his JD to a joint JD/MBA degree at Osgoode Hall and the Schulich School of Business, in corporate and international law.

Sayjon described the internship as adding a valuable perspective to his classes as he brought his experiences of the corporate law environment into his courses and the papers he wrote.

For Amal, it was the experiential aspect of the program that attracted her. “I was interested in law but not corporate law because I didn’t see anyone like me reflected in the environment. This was an opportunity to put myself there and see if it was a fit.” Amal came into the program after her second year at university so her idea of her future was less formed than Sayjon’s as a pre-law intern. The exposure to the lawyers in Blakes offices and TD as she worked on diversity initiatives brought her a focus and determination with a passion for a legal career on Bay Street that hadn’t been there before participating in the program.

Amal worked with Elisabeth Patrick and Jarvis Héту in the legal department at TD. They described how the partnership came about when Blakes reached out the bank to sponsor the initiative.

When asked what the pre-law diversity internship meant to the team at TD, Elisabeth said, “It’s important to TD as an enterprise that we’re not excluding people unconsciously and that we’re an accepting environment. Like at Blakes, there are a lot of women in key positions at TD so it’s great for interning students to come in and see that.” Jarvis added that “Blakes is one of the law firms leading the charge on diversity and inclusion.”

Shared values between organizations is a strong component of successful partnerships. Jarvis described Blakes as “leading the charge on diversity and inclusion among the law firms,” pointing to the intern program as “exhibit A.” In defining the benefits of the program, Elisabeth said that while people look to the students as beneficiaries, “it helps to build internal buy-in when you look at the benefit to the organization as a whole.” The research project of Amal’s, on what other companies were doing regarding women in leadership, and Sayjon’s research which analyzed diversity in law, comparing Toronto with New York law firms, were both projects that TD values which wouldn’t have been completed without the support of the pre-law internship.

The power of mentorship

It became evident in the interviews with the people at Blakes, the students and clients that the law firm has developed a strong culture of mentoring which has contributed to the success of their diversity intern program. Lawyers, including partners, offer valuable face-time in meetings with the students over the first portion of the eight-week program with the firm, taking them to events and extending introductions within their networks.

In sharing their experiences at Blakes, the students described the transformative effect that mentors had on how they saw their futures. Amal said that before she was at the law firm, her expectation had been that women like her, identifying as a Muslim woman wearing a hijab, didn’t pursue successful careers in law outside of their community. But a meeting with one of the lawyers at the firm who was a Muslim woman and a partner changed how she looked at a career in law and potential for a career at a large firm like Blakes unfolded for her.

The access to one-on-one time with lawyers of all generations helped this group of students see themselves as lawyers at the firm and understand how they could get there. For Colleen, the experience convinced her that business law was for her. And the encouragement she received from one of the lawyers she had worked with at Blakes helped her focus her options and only apply to the best schools. Blakes culture of mentoring gave her the confidence she needed to not second guess herself because she was a strong candidate.

Involved and evolved

The results of the program reflect the interests of the groups of people we interviewed. Everyone interviewed had unqualified praise for the initiative. We see that especially in Canada, cross-organizational collaboration is key to most successful diversity and inclusion initiatives. This series of case studies has included many examples of productive partnerships among organizations in the diversity and inclusion community where shared values have been leveraged to create programs that were made more effective by working together. The partnerships Blakes has cultivated with clients equally invested in diversity and inclusion have contributed to the success of this talent pipeline initiative.

Elisabeth Patrick and Jarvis Héту of TD reported that the value the initiative brought went beyond offering an opportunity for a diverse candidate in a corporate legal setting, it extended to the bank itself. Elisabeth zeroed in on Amal’s performance. “It was a tremendous opportunity to

get her in our program. It's great to see someone who performs so well with an interest in diversity and in law – those are the people we want to see at TD.”

And what started as a pipeline initiative for Blakes to increase diversity among its lawyers has advanced the dialogue within the firm and brought them closer to students, while creating tighter bonds in client relationships. Throughout our interviews, we heard people talk about how Blakes is taking an explicit role in promoting diversity and inclusion leadership in law. The people at the firm, the students and the banks all described feeling it made a difference in the lives of those who participated. Though Blakes doesn't expect that all the pre-law interns will end up as lawyers, Mary Jackson said, “It's the right thing to do, and just one more way to help bring diversity to law.”

In looking to increase diversity among the students it was reaching, Blakes might just have figured out how to cultivate millennials. The experiences that Amal, Colleen and Sayjon shared for this case study mirror the aspirations for their generation when they spoke of seeing futures they hadn't imagined for themselves, where they could integrate their passions and bring their values and full selves to corporate work that's meaningful. The first intern to participate in the Diversity and Inclusion Pre-law Summer Student Program was invited to return the following year to intern as a law student, and is now an employment and labour lawyer at the firm.

Because of the program, Sayjon Ariyaratnam is now studying law at Osgoode Hall Law School and the Schulich School of Business. He has returned to Blakes as a Knowledge Management intern and has helped organize the outreach events at York and the University of Toronto that are attracting pre-law undergrads. Amal Naufer is now in her third year at Schulich School of Business. TD invited her back to work part-time in their corporate offices on Bay Street while she's in school. Colleen Milne is completing her final year at Guelph and was studying for her LSATs at the time of this interview. She has since applied and been accepted to law school.

Increasingly, companies are showing that diversity and inclusion adds value to employee engagement and improved financial performance. Like Blakes, the firm's clients also have offices in international centres where diversity is more than a concept. The insights from productive client partnerships like this are valuable to any organization looking to increase diversity in recruitment.

Manny Lam of BMO summarized the success of the program by saying, “The BMO & Blakes Indigenous Summer Student Program is an important way that we can build on the strong relationships we have with our First Nations communities. As a lawyer, it's very rewarding to open up opportunities and encourage future legal professionals to consider the range of options available to them through a corporate law career path.”

The Success Story Initiative

There is astonishingly little published that shines a light on diversity and inclusion successes in Canada, though there are many, across a wide range of organizations. Case studies referenced by trainers and leadership tend to be reporting on different countries, cultures, political and economic settings.

The goal of this initiative is to support diversity and inclusion leadership with stories that are relevant to what's happening now, here in Canada. By sharing their stories, we celebrate the successes of Canadian organizations while contributing to learning for everyone that cares about diversity and inclusion.

The employers who have developed initiatives to promote diversity and inclusion as priorities in the workplace are responding to an increasingly competitive economy that's responsive to the diversity of employees – and the country. We are grateful to those who have participated in interviews.

This series of case studies will be published monthly through 2016. Subscribing to our monthly newsletter at ccdi.ca will keep you updated with the latest case studies, which will all be posted online at ccdi.ca/successstories. For more information, contact mail@ccdi.ca.

The Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion

The CCDI has a mission to help the organizations we work with be inclusive, free of prejudice and discrimination – and to generate the awareness, dialogue and action for people to recognize diversity as an asset and not an obstacle.

Through the research, reports and toolkits we develop and our workshops, events and workplace consultations, we're helping Canadian employers understand their diversity, plan for it and create inclusion.

CCDI's leadership has a proven model that's cultivated trust as an impartial third party. Our expertise is focused on the topics of inclusion that are relevant in Canada now and the regional differences that shape diversity.

A charitable organization that thinks like a business, we have created a niche with our innovative research technology and data analysis that brings a deeper understanding of Canadian diversity demographics and mindsets at any given moment.

CCDI is grateful for the support of Employer Partners across Canada. For enquiries, contact Susan Rogers, Chief Client Officer, Susan.Rogers@ccdi.ca or (416) 968-6520, ext 103.

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