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THE A-LIST

THINKING HOLISTICALLY

TO MAKE IT ONTO THE A-LIST, LAW FIRMS CONSIDER THE FULL SCOPE OF FINANCIAL AND CULTURAL HEALTH.

BY SAMANTHA STOKES

METHODOLOGY: The A-List recognizes firms based on a combination of factors, both financial and cultural: revenue per lawyer, pro bono commitment, associate satisfaction, racial diversity and gender diversity (the percentage of equity partners who are women), with RPL and pro bono given double weight. Each metric measures Am Law 200 firms' relative performance—a firm's score in a given category is based on its ranking among all 200 firms. Each category, as well as the overall score, is based on a 100-point scale.



WHEN IT COMES TO running a well-rounded law firm, leaders can't treat issues such as profitability, diversity and pro bono individually. To be their best, they have to think and operate holistically.

The American Lawyer's annual A-List ranking doesn't measure size or profits. Rather, it highlights the best of the best law firms for their commitment to a variety of financial and cultural markers: revenue per lawyer, pro bono work, associate satisfaction, racial diversity and gender diversity among the partnership. The last metric was added to our calculation in 2017 to recognize firms for supporting women and making them partners.

But it's not enough for firms to keep associates happy or to dedicate a few extra hours to their pro bono commitments. To make the A-List, all of these issues have to share top priority.

"They're a part of the firm culture, and we're not treating these as siloed barometers of firm success," Benjamin Klubes, managing partner of Washington, D.C.-based Buckley, says of the five metrics. "They're interrelated in many ways."

Buckley jumped nine spots to move onto this year's A-List at No. 17, improving in three of the five categories, most notably associate satisfaction, which increased by 20.5 points.

Becoming a well-rounded firm isn't about leadership handing down directives, Klubes says. Rather, it requires having a broad consensus about firm values.

"Our overall and long-term success is a function of our culture, where all of these things are important," Klubes says.

Bradley Butwin, chairman of O'Melveny & Myers, which cracked the top 10 for the second year in a row and moved up two places to No. 7, agrees. His firm doesn't really think in terms of one-off initiatives. Instead, it uses resources such as affinity groups, engagement surveys and a two-way communication policy to continually give colleagues a voice and give everyone at the firm something to work toward.

"They're part of our everyday vocabulary, and they're ingrained in our DNA and our firm strategy," Butwin says of the A-List metrics. "[These issues] are not relegated to the side. We expect everyone to participate, and we make that expectation very explicit."

O'Melveny was propelled forward on this year's list by its female equity partners score, which increased 16 points, as well as a second year in a row with a near-perfect associate satisfaction score of 99.5.

Butwin sees the A-List metrics as interrelated. Many of the pro bono opportunities O'Melveny takes on deal with issues that affect marginalized groups, which, in turn, inspire associates because they get to take on assignments they care about. In this way, Butwin says the firm is often addressing three or more A-List metrics at the same time.

"A-List elements are often intertwined," he says. "They're not mutually exclusive."

O'Melveny has focused on leading by example and promoting new and diverse voices, Butwin says, helping the firm succeed both financially and culturally in the process. Eighty percent of this year's new partner class were women, people of color and members of the LGBTQ community, he says, and this is the fourth straight year that more than half of the firm's new partner class has been diverse.

Robert Novick, a co-managing partner at Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr, which held steady at No. 2 on the A-List for the second year in a row, says the A-List categories often function in concert. Specifically, he highlights the firm's increasing effort to do pro bono work—97% of U.S.-based attorneys, including 82% of attorneys at the partner level, completed at least 20 pro bono hours last year. The experience improves associates' satisfaction because they are working on causes they care about, and it also allows them to gain experience with more challenging and engaging assignments.

"The metrics are not considered in isolation, but as a cohesive set of elements," he says. "If you do those right, they're fostering the kind of environment you want to have."

Law firm leaders agree that devoting time and resources to holistically considering the A-List metrics improves client relationships, makes a firm stronger and makes good business sense.

"We're a firm that has always balanced economic goals and success with professional success and maintaining an environment that has people wanting to come and stay with us," Novick says. "Investing in employees outside of the economic development of the firm and retaining people, these things are all mutually reinforcing."

Business success at Buckley is directly related to such A-List metrics as diversity, Klubes says.

"We're successful on a revenue basis because we have a diverse group of lawyers here who meet client needs and bring different perspectives to legal issues," he says.

To Butwin, improving O'Melveny's results in the A-List categories is morally right, and clients recognize that. They're hungry to work with firms invested in both cultural and financial success.

"Diversity and giving back to the community [through pro bono work] means we do better and give clients our best efforts," he says. "Client satisfaction is paramount, and commitment to our values benefits our clients."

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