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# Amid Push for Inclusion, Law Firms Face Pressure to Make Racial Progress: "Everyone Has to Be Part of the Effort"

Implicit bias combined with an overreliance on social networks to find new hires means inclusion within the ranks of entertainment talent boutiques continues to be a struggle — even as clients begin to demand diverse representation.

BY **REBECCA SUN** MAY 28, 2021 8:15AM

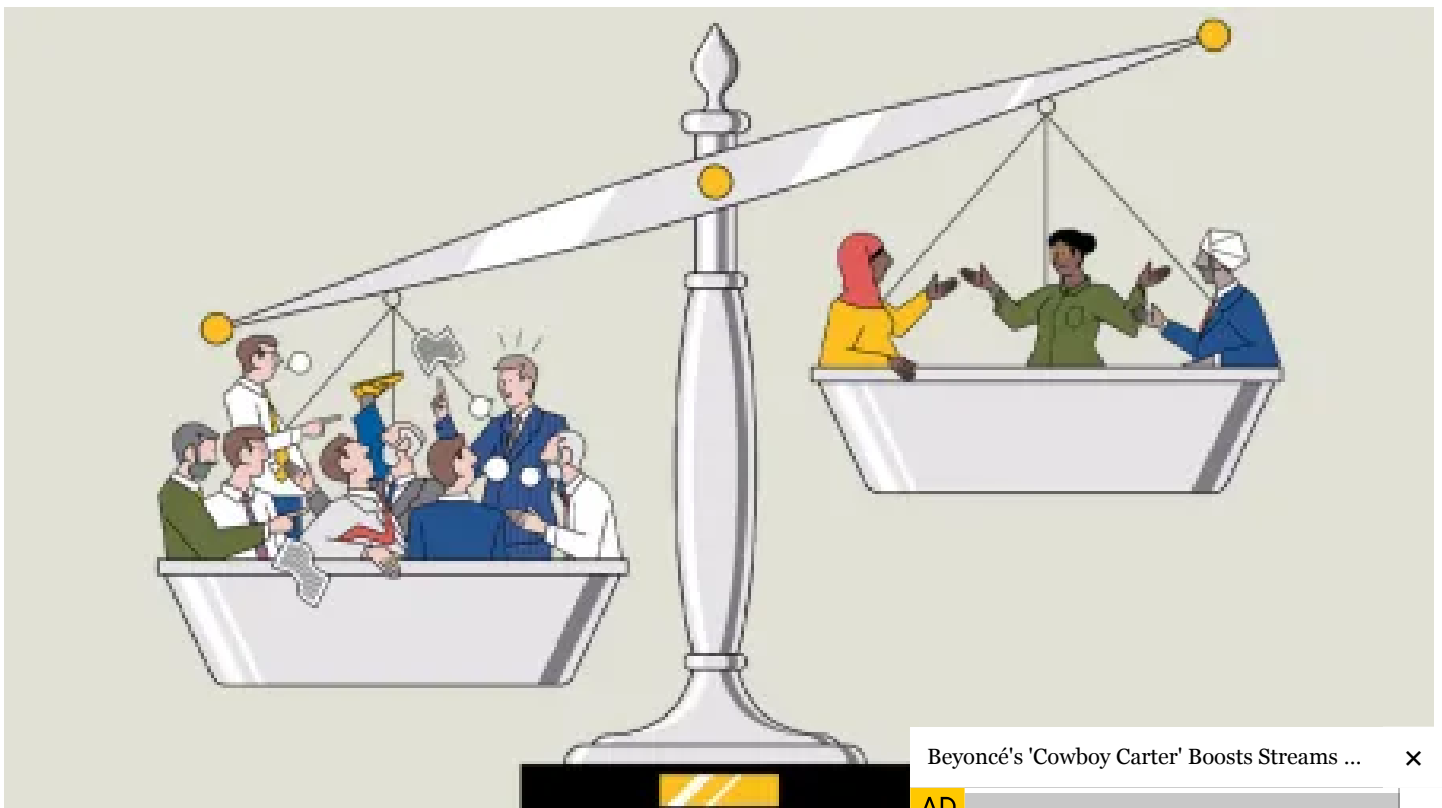


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“I didn’t understand how much who you knew mattered,” says Shaw. “It’s one of the issues you face if you’re not an insider: You don’t know it matters, and you don’t necessarily know anyone to refer you.”

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So when she answered an ad in the trades from talent firm Dern Mason, she was counseled by friends to wipe any mentions of Black film and Black lawyer associations from her résumé and to find an excuse to conduct her initial interview over the phone. Shaw isn’t sure if those strategies helped her get hired, but that was the advice she was given to increase the odds.

There has been progress in diversifying the ranks but, like the entertainment and legal industries at large, the field remains disproportionately white and male. And the disparity within the talent boutiques is compounded by the insularity of the practice, one that’s reliant upon referrals and networks.

“I grew up in Los Angeles but was not anywhere close or adjacent to the entertainment business, so I had no idea there were firms out there that represented talent,” says Hansen Jacobson’s John Meigs Jr., who was first exposed to the practice while working as an entertainment litigation lawyer. “Right off the bat, if you have a firm that has very few people of color, you’re not going to be a good fit.”

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associations and started cold-calling people. “It wasn’t a matter of Latinx lawyers not wanting to be in entertainment law,” she says.

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Attorney Jaia Thomas’ Diverse Representation also maintains a database of Black sports and entertainment lawyers across the country. Another remedy is to adopt the Mansfield Rule: At least a third of the candidates for any given job must be from a historically underrepresented community.

Gang Tyre has done it, but partner Annie Lee, who serves on the firm’s Diversity, Equity and Inclusion committee, says retention is just as important: “What are you doing to create an environment where everyone feels welcome and has equal access to advancement?” she asks. “If you have someone at the table but they’re not getting to talk to clients or get in on the best deals, then [have you] really given them the opportunity?”

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Building a practice isn't easy for any young attorney, but it's harder without referrals from agents and managers, who also tend to rely on social connections. Johnson says attorneys of color sometimes are put in a box. He recalls a white agent lamenting, "I don't represent many African Americans, so I don't know if I can help you build your practice."

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It's not uncommon for talent to reach out directly in lieu of a referral from their reps. "As an African American attorney, you overwhelmingly are getting those calls from clients, not the agencies or management," says Fox Rothschild's Darrell Miller.

But that is changing among the next-gen set, says Whiteside-Munteanu: "Younger agents and managers of color are creating a coalition out here. We are actively referring people who are within these intersections."

Meigs adds clients under 35 also seem to prioritize having diversity on their teams. He says, "The younger they are, the more willing they are to exercise their power."

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