

Rebecca Ruppert McMahon



Show Me the WIIFM

Early in my career as a community volunteer, I landed on the development committee for a Cleveland nonprofit where we focused on ways to get people to be engaged — through contribution of time, talent and money. During one particular meeting, I remember someone using a word that sounded made up to me: “WIIFM.” It popped out in phrases like, “It’s all about the WIIFM” and “We need to keep the WIIFM up front.” Everyone nodded vigorously in agreement each time the word surfaced. Toward the end of the meeting when I failed to figure the word out on my own, I finally asked for a definition.

What’s In It For Me.

The word hasn’t left my vocabulary since then. It’s the key to just about everything, profit or nonprofit alike. People often need to see the personal “why” before saying yes to an ask — from purchasing products and services, to taking jobs and accepting volunteer opportunities. And it’s not necessarily a selfish act as some might perceive ... more of a, “tell me how this will make my life better in some way.”

We’ve been talking a lot about WIIFMs at the CMBA lately, particularly in the context of our first of its kind inclusion initiative, **Cleveland Legal Inclusion 2020**.

We — Majeed Makhlof, our VP of Diversity & Inclusion and I — have reported out regularly over the past year about:

- the D&I Committee’s two phase survey initiative from which we collected a mountain of demographic information and more about our Cleveland legal community;
- Our analysis of the survey data which showed us that progress has been slow, but opportunity abounds; and
- the 27 organizations that signed a pledge in May to engage in a collective effort to find a stronger, smarter approach to diversifying Cleveland’s legal work force and leadership, while also building a more inclusive legal community.

In mid October, during a meeting that drew representatives from more than 50 organizations, we debuted the product of those collective efforts: Cleveland Legal Inclusion 2020. Drawing upon best practices from around the country, and the very specific goals for our own community, the 27 organizations that heeded the call to collective action developed a simple, yet innovative plan that:

Invites every member of our legal community — law firm, corporation, nonprofit, court, public agency, law school and beyond — to jump on board for an initial, three-year plan for collaboration;

Calls for the hiring of a Director of Inclusion — funded by the participating organizations and working exclusively for the benefit of the same participating organizations — who will have a genuine passion for and experience with diversifying a profession and making organizations more inclusive;

Places recruitment of minority attorneys from outside Cleveland as the top priority for the first three years, while continued effort and innovation will be focused on what is happening inside Cleveland’s existing community with respect to retention, leadership and promotion, our local pipeline (including Cleveland’s law schools and the CMBA’s high school, college and law school initiatives) and the breadth of engagement in Cleveland Legal Inclusion 2020 from across greater Cleveland; and

Creates a sliding scale funding model where organizations are asked to contribute annually for the next three years based upon the size of their presence within our community (from a high of \$12,500 annually for large firms to a low of \$500 for nonprofits).

So, what’s the WIIFM in all of this? Every member of Cleveland Legal Inclusion 2020 will:

1. Have direct and exclusive access to a national recruiter who will be able to tap into new markets and a community marketing plan that will showcase Cleveland as an inclusive environment to live, work and play;

2. Elevate their public profile both locally and nationally;
3. Increase their current diversification and future organizational leadership;
4. Increase their competitive edge; and
5. Increase retention of minority and women attorneys.

So, who’s in so far? Taft Stettinius & Hollister jumped onboard first. Then came a bunch more: Benesch, Friedlander, Coplan & Aronoff LLP, Berns, Ockner & Greenberger, LLC, Cavitch, Familo & Durkin Co., L.P.A., The Chandra Law Firm LLC, Cleveland Metroparks, Cleveland State University, Cuyahoga County Probate Court, Cuyahoga County Prosecutor’s Office, Forest City Realty Trust, Inc., Giffen & Kaminski LLC, McDonald Hopkins LLC, Meyers, Roman, Friedberg & Lewis, Ogletree, Deakins, Nash, Smoak & Stewart, P.C., Thacker Robinson Zinz Co., LPA, Thompson Hine LLP, Ulmer & Berne LLP, United Church of Christ, Zashin & Rich.

By the time you read this article, we hope to have landed another 10 to 20 — or maybe more — who share the vision and commitment to working together to create a more genuinely inclusive legal community in Cleveland.

Crain’s Cleveland covered this initiative in the October 23, 2016 issue, they called this project “an otherwise rare display of legal groups joining forces for the common good of their profession and the Cleveland region itself.” Come meet us at the Bar to work toward a WIIFM that will catapult our legal community and greater Cleveland to the top of the inclusion — and thus the innovation — leaderboard.

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