

# Legal recruiter selling diversity to firms

BY ALAN BREZNICK

CRAIN'S NEW YORK BUSINESS

Ronni L. Gaines is seeking to specialize in diversity.

Ms. Gaines, a headhunter who runs her own legal recruitment firm, has formed a division focused on placing women and minority lawyers. Legal recruiters say it's probably the first service in New York or New Jersey to concentrate on this niche in the nearly lily-white profession.

Ms. Gaines, president of Topaz International Inc., says she started the division two months ago because of growing demand from both law firms and corporate clients for non-white, non-male lawyers. Known as Topaz Legal Minority Network, the special unit is now conducting at least 15 searches for women, black, Hispanic or Asian lawyers.

"We wanted to become more visible so that minority candidates had someone they could go to," she says. For whatever reason, she argues, minority attorneys have often not made it through the interview screening process before.

Ms. Gaines says such searches already account for as much as 25% of her firm's total work. The four-year-old West Orange, N.J., firm, which has six headhunters placing lawyers and paralegals in temporary and permanent slots, projects generating \$2 million in revenues this year. She plans to double staff and revenue next year.

## A very sensitive issue

As in many professions, diversity is a sensitive issue in the legal field because African-American, Hispanic, Asian and even women attorneys are still relatively scarce in the private sector.

Last fall, for instance, the city bar association started a program with 35 major firms to make minority lawyers 10% of their new

hires by the end of 1996.

Even predominantly minority firms don't add many to the mix. Only one minority firm in New York—Wood, Williams, Rafalsky & Harris—has more than 10 attorneys.

"Sure, there is a need for that (minority recruitment service)," says LeRoi Gill, president of the 800-member Metropolitan Black Bar Association and partner in a five-lawyer firm. Because of government cutbacks, he says, many African-American attorneys are looking to leave public service, which they once found more receptive, for private practices.

Other legal recruiters applaud Ms. Gaines' intentions. But they question just how big the market for minority attorneys is.

"The problem is that the pool of

people is very small," says Lynn Mestel, who runs a Manhattan recruitment agency. "And they may be harder to place than one would necessarily believe" because of apprehensions about affirmative-action programs, she adds.

Recruitment experts also contend that, ironically enough, Topaz may run into trouble with anti-discrimination laws if it places too great an emphasis on minority attorneys. If an agency discourages some qualified applicants, even subtly, it could be sued for bias.

"Reverse discrimination is as illegal as the traditional form (of discrimination)," says Joel Klarreich, general counsel to the Association of Personnel Consultants of New York State. "There is a fine line that they're walking."

Ms. Gaines acknowledges this concern. She stresses that Topaz presents all qualified candidates for a position, no matter what their sex, race or creed.

"The real thing is they (clients) need to have a full selection," she says. "I don't think they were getting a choice before."

## Firms have specific needs

Ms. Gaines says she's particularly fielding requests for minority attorneys from large, multinational corporations looking to do more business overseas. Rather than blatantly ask for black, Hispanic or Asian attorneys, companies usually couch their requests by specifying job requirements that minority candidates are more likely to meet.

For instance, one corporate cli-

ent is hunting for a lawyer with "strong Asian language skills," especially in Mandarin Chinese, for a Far East post. Another wants an attorney fluent in Spanish for its Latin-American operations.

Although generally less aggressive than Topaz's corporate clients, larger law firms are also starting to show more interest in minority attorneys, Ms. Gaines says.

She adds that firms are under pressure from government agencies and their own clients and potential clients to broaden their base of talent.

"The world is diversifying," she says. "Companies and law firms that are going to be survivors have to recognize the need to diversify their staffs." ■

# CRAIN'S NEW YORK BUSINESS