

Celebrating equity and diversity

To celebrate the success of this year's Queensland Law Society Equity & Diversity Awards, each winning firm was invited by the Equalising Opportunities in the Law Committee to submit a short article on their achievements. Here are their responses.

Clayton Utz

Winner, Large Legal Practice Award

Clayton Utz has put diversity and inclusion at the heart of its business, supporting the firm's focus on its two key assets – its people and clients.

Key diversity and inclusion initiatives include flexible working – supported by a new progressive policy and a dedicated national flexibility manager, a national LGBTI program, and a domestic violence policy. From 1 July, the firm has also made superannuation contributions on a component of an employee's unpaid parental leave, helping to address gender disparity in superannuation balances at retirement.

Clayton Utz chief executive partner Rob Cutler, who also serves as the firm's Diversity Council chair, said he was particularly proud of the firm's progress on gender equality and flexible working, and would continue to drive change through targeted initiatives.

"As lawyers, we have an important role to play in promoting diversity, equality, respect and inclusion in society," he said. "That has to start with our own firm. We're committed to gender equality and gender pay equity, and we're making excellent progress with the initiatives we've put in place to support this.

"The next step for us is taking this success and applying what we've learnt to drive our broader diversity and inclusion agenda, focusing on embracing inclusion as much as recognising difference to bring about more positive change within our workplace."

Clayton Utz's efforts to promote and embed diversity and inclusion are having a positive impact. The number of employees who remain with Clayton Utz for more than a year after returning from parental leave, for example, has increased – a reflection of the firm's enhanced flexible work policy, parental leave policy and scheme, and continued on-the-job support for working parents.

Clayton Utz was recently awarded the 2016 Pride in Diversity Australian Workplace Equality Index Awards Achievement Award, and in 2015 was named an Employer of Choice for Gender Equality by the Workplace Gender Equality Agency.

Miller Harris Lawyers

Winner, Small Legal Practice Award

Miller Harris Lawyers has implemented a range of initiatives to promote equity and diversity in the workplace and has enjoyed a positive impact on business performance as a result.

"The diversity of thought and opinion that comes from employing people from a range of different backgrounds is a key strength of our business and provides us with a competitive edge," partner Melissa Nielsen said. "Supporting and encouraging diversity ensures that as a firm we embrace new ways of doing things and continually challenge and improve the way we work.

"We are also conscious of the evolution of our workplace over time. More and more people are seeking flexible working arrangements and we have adapted our policies with this in mind to ensure we attract and retain high-calibre people.

"Of our team of over 30 people, 42% are currently employed on flexible working arrangements. It's a two-way street. Our team certainly go the extra mile when needed and we're accommodating in return.

"I have personally benefited from the firm's commitment in this area through a flexible return to work following parental leave on a number of occasions."

All three of the firm's senior associates are also currently employed on flexible working arrangements while caring for young families.

Harrington

Family Lawyers

Winner, Small Legal Practice Initiative Award

by Stephen Page

We humans are a pretty diverse bunch. We come in all shapes and sizes – and have all kinds of relationships.

As family lawyers, we have been told stories that we couldn't imagine. We have been shocked at horrific stories of domestic violence, mainly by men towards women. All of us are entitled to be treated with dignity and should be treated equally before the law.

The law, as we know, does not always treat people equally. Discrimination continues under the law. When I took my oath of office back in 1987 I was determined to make sure that not only would I act for clients, but I would try and help make the world a better, fairer place.

In 2007 as part of that commitment, I started writing the Australian Gay and Lesbian Law Blog, the first of its kind in Australia. The blog now has a life of its own. I would never have imagined it would be included in the Australian Archives or that it would have had over 350,000 hits. The blog has helped lift both my profile and that of the firm. Through a convoluted process (too long for this article) it helped me become an international representative on the Assisted Reproductive Technologies Committee of the American Bar Association.

Each of us think that we are individuals who are weak and powerless. Each of us can choose to be strong, and sometimes the results amaze us and everyone around us. Embracing and nurturing our differences can achieve extraordinary and unimagined results.