

# ALLEN & OVERY

## Colour of Success

*Conversations about race and ethnicity*



# With openness and dialogue comes better understanding

*“...at the end of the day, hard work, dedication and talent do not go ignored.”*



**Over the past few months, I've spoken to six people at Allen & Overy from completely different backgrounds who all have one thing in common: they want to talk more openly about race and ethnicity.**

In a corporate environment, it's something people often don't know how to start a conversation about – whether that's a simple question on where your name comes from, or a wider conversation about why there aren't more people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds at the top of the legal profession.

So, this year – alongside the launch of our Race and Ethnicity @ A&O network – I began a series of interviews with colleagues to start those conversations.

It's been great to hear their stories and to see how successful and engaged everyone is with their careers at A&O.

Despite the challenges that BAME individuals can face in a high-pressure environment, what I've learned both myself and from my colleagues is that, at the end of the day, hard work, dedication and talent do not go ignored. But sometimes there can be more to it.

For me, arriving at A&O as a trainee in 2015, I did worry whether I'd be able to forge the relationships with fellow trainees, associates and partners that I knew would be so important to my development here.

I'd gone from my local state secondary school in Essex to Oxford University and found it quite a culture shock initially. At sixth form I was one of only a few people doing well academically, so I was a big fish in a small pond.

But at Oxford I was surrounded by people who were not only academically very good but also swam for their county or threw discus for Team GB. That can be quite daunting. I was just some kid from Basildon.

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David Odejayi – Associate

Going through that experience did help me to acclimatise at A&O, where you're also surrounded by extremely driven people. But I do feel it's harder to join the profession if you're from a working class and BAME background because there can be soft barriers when you arrive. You question whether you have the cultural capital to build the relationships you need to progress. If you come from a background where you don't share the same interests and experiences, it can be more difficult to build the rapport you need with colleagues.

I believe the key is looking to the people around you who are really good at what they do and learning from them. This is a job where you learn by doing so you need to have someone you can look at and say: they are successful, how do they do it?

That is a feeling echoed throughout these interviews – the importance of finding people who can encourage and champion your talent. They don't have to look like you and come from the same background – it can be helpful and motivating, but it's not essential.

*“I'm here because people took the time, throughout my student life and my career, to give me guidance and answer my questions. It's my responsibility to pay it forward.”*

It's still early in my career and I wouldn't call myself a role model yet – but I do want to make a difference. Earlier this year, I was part of a programme that brings BAME undergraduates into A&O to learn about life in the law. As I was speaking I thought to myself, I was on this same programme several years ago and now I'm on the other side of the table!

For me, that was an important moment. Part of the reason I'm here is because people took the time, throughout my student life and my career, to give me guidance and answer my questions. It's my responsibility to pay it forward.

Here, across these interviews, we're just starting a conversation. But with openness and dialogue comes better understanding and action. I hope that in five to ten years we'll see real progress in tackling the drop-off of BAME individuals at more senior levels in the profession. Our aim is to make people feel comfortable bringing themselves to work and to ensure that everyone can progress and thrive.



## You have to be a little bit brave



**In the workplace, as elsewhere – and for many complex reasons – it can sometimes be very awkward to talk about race. But getting over the awkwardness and having the courage to create a space where we can talk openly offers us the best chance of making A&O a truly diverse and inclusive place.**

Differences in others is a tough thing to talk about because, instinctively, it feels wrong. But it's not wrong. It's about all of us accepting that we come from different backgrounds and places, speak, look and think differently. That is part of the value we bring.

I started my career in law in the early 2000s and it was a different environment back then. I'm ethnically Indian, and was brought up in Hong Kong, South Korea and Kenya, and educated in the UK, so I had grown up with friends from every possible background.

When I entered the law firm environment, where everyone was quite alike, it was in some ways the first time I really felt different. I remember feeling sometimes that I couldn't get a handle on things – the language, the different idioms – and didn't have any familiarity with the similar backgrounds people shared. It's the same for someone from a different socio-economic background – the cultural capital point applies just as much.

But it's up to you how you deal with it. As with almost everything in life, you have to be brave to overcome these things. For me, I did what I've always done – I sought help.

I was lucky to find great people to mentor me from an early stage of my career – not people from the same background as me, they were all white: one woman, two men; one Irish, two English. There was no formal coaching or training, it was just a case of three people who got to know me, took an interest in me and helped me come along.

*“It's about all of us accepting that we come from different backgrounds and places, speak, look and think differently. That is part of the value we bring.”*

Karan Dinamani – Partner

I've certainly had moments of self-doubt along the way, an 'internal noise' about getting things wrong. It is easy to doubt yourself in circumstances where you are quite different to other people. But you have to back yourself.

We need to take that noise away for people, to the extent we can, in order to get the best out of each other and attract the best people. I was lucky to find people who took an interest in me – but it shouldn't be down to luck. Everyone, minority or otherwise, needs support to really flourish in a high-performance culture like ours.

What I want most of all is to have a confident and rational conversation about race and for people to engage with the issue in their daily work, giving confidence to minorities that they absolutely can flourish and succeed.

I'd like people to take a moment to actively think about a situation where they may not have given someone enough credit. Challenge yourselves to do that!

And the truth is, over time, it will become easier. The generation coming through now has grown up in an environment where the importance of inclusion is just accepted.

*“I'd like people to take a moment to actively think about a situation where they may not have given someone enough credit. Challenge yourselves to do that!”*



# It's not like a coat you can take off



MaameYaa Kwafo-Akoto – Senior Associate

*“From the morning I found out I’d got the training contract, I thought, hard work really does pay off. And that made me realise if you have the talent and work hard you can really achieve things.”*

**What I saw when I walked through the door, on my first day of work experience in a law firm in Mayfair, was different to anything I had experienced before. It was a very privileged environment, from the PAs down to the tea boys.**

There was no obvious racism at all, but I do remember the quick up and down glances. I wondered if I would ever fit in, and if I might have to change to do so.

My parents are Ghanaian – Mum was a midwife, Dad was a businessman – and I went to a state school in London. Becoming a lawyer took a lot of hard work and commitment early on.

I worked part-time while studying for the GDL and then sold cakes to ‘Wrap It Up’, at that time a single shop selling sandwich wraps near Liverpool Street station. I approached them about selling the cakes I loved to bake – they said yes and I ended up baking right through the LPC. I then became a paralegal at A&O before being offered a training contract.

*“My advice to people is be you – bring your whole self to work.”*

From the morning I found out I'd got the training contract, I thought, hard work really does pay off. And that made me realise if you have the talent and work hard you can really achieve things.

It can be difficult to realise your potential without the confidence that sometimes comes with a certain kind of education. And it's often the case that many BAME trainees tend to come from less privileged backgrounds. When you do, it can be easy to fall prey to that idea of having two personalities – one for work and one for home. Sometimes I struggle to know if that's just about being professional or denying who you are, which is not acceptable.

But early on, one of my external mentors advised me that dealing with being different sometimes just means not thinking about your race. He said when you go into a room, although your race is obvious to everyone, you don't need it to be a chip on your shoulder.

He was right. It's not like a coat you can take off. This is just you and you have to be comfortable with that.

I'm pleased that we attract a good number of BAME trainees at A&O. I'm on the panel of interviewers for future trainees and believe strongly that unconscious bias is something everyone should be aware of when they are making recruitment decisions. It means we give candidates the best chance of success and give ourselves the opportunity to recruit the best talent.

I'm proud that I'm a senior associate and I am black, and I am fully aware that with seniority comes influence. I'm determined to use that influence to help others, and was really proud to be included in the FT EMpower 50 Ethnic Minority Future Leaders list, and the FT HERoes list for women, this year. If we want to inspire more young BAME professionals, and create more diversity at the top broadly, we need to change the perception of the professional landscape starting with how it looks.

I know that becoming a more diverse organisation will take time but I hope I can play a part by being a source of advice to other BAME individuals starting their careers – whether that's on professional matters or, as I've been asked, whether it's alright to wear braids, a weave or Afro – all of which are definitely OK!

Overall, my advice to people is be you – bring your whole self to work.

But leaders must also challenge themselves to ensure they're supporting and sponsoring talent in all its diversity and creating a culture where it's a case of 'I understand you'.

I'd like to think we are the sort of place where, on that first day, a BAME trainee walks into the lift and thinks I'm just as good as the next person in here, regardless of my race.



## It's more complex than just race



**I didn't have any expectations about diversity when I joined A&O, but now I think that is potentially part of the problem. It seems like for some time the business world accepted the status quo without challenging it or asking how we could improve racial diversity. I'm pleased to see BAME issues moving higher up on the agenda.**

There is no shortage of good role models here – lots of inspirational women I work with, members of the LGBT+ network, lawyers and non-lawyers – and many have helped me to progress. But as a black person it can be harder to find role models who look like you.

For this reason, mentoring will be a key part of the Race and Ethnicity @ A&O network launched this year, but there are many shapes those relationships can take. Some people will feel strongly that their mentor should be from the same background as them – and that's fine – but I don't think that's necessarily always the right approach.

The issue we face is lack of familiarity; there's a sense that people are afraid to ask about someone's life for fear of offending. But the more you familiarise yourself with people from different backgrounds, the easier the conversations become. A person's defining feature is not their race. If you scratch beneath the surface you'll see there are plenty of things people have in common.

I also think the business world needs to consider BAME communities in a broader sense. It's more complex than just race. I strongly believe that to solve the issue of under-representation of the BAME community, we need to look at social inclusion more widely. I don't think anyone would have a problem getting in the door and up the ladder – regardless of race – if they have the cultural capital.

*“There's no shame in asking how to pronounce someone's last name or where your family are from. If you don't, you risk never getting to build a relationship with someone, all because you didn't ask a question.”*

Antoinette Willcocks – PR Manager

So we need to challenge ourselves on the barriers that exist around social and educational background and how these might have a knock-on effect on racial diversity. This is, in many ways, a more difficult task.

At this stage, I think the most important thing you can do as a member of the BAME community is simply be yourself. You shouldn't try to dull part of your personality to fit in. And I don't think you should ever change to make other people feel more comfortable – that's an insult to your colleagues and to yourself.

If you're not a BAME person then I would urge you not to be afraid of causing offence! There's no shame in asking how to pronounce someone's last name or where your family are from. If you don't, you risk never getting to build a relationship with someone, all because you didn't ask a question.

Steering clear of certain topics is probably well intentioned, but showing an interest in a person means you'll build a more fruitful relationship. You can only build a real relationship with somebody if you are genuinely yourself. If you are trying to be something different you are never going to do yourself justice.

*“...we need to challenge ourselves on the barriers that exist around social and educational background and how these might have a knock-on effect on racial diversity.”*

*“A person's defining feature is not their race. If you scratch beneath the surface you'll see there are plenty of things people have in common.”*

# Having the discussion about race

**I've always taken a deep interest in the diversity and inclusion debate and I want it to be discussed and addressed in the broadest sense.**

I grew up in Northern Ireland and when I arrived in London I was really aware of being different.

Since marrying my wife, Caroline, who has Jamaican heritage, we have four mixed-race children. It was actually my kids who really brought the issue of diversity into sharp focus for me at my 50th birthday party.

They pointed out that there were no black people at the party apart from their Mum. And I thought, that's fundamentally about not having enough colleagues from different backgrounds, because, when you've been a partner for a long time, your world becomes the people you work with.

We have definitely got better at having the discussion about race – people are much more open and aware. We're able to articulate and discuss the issue more confidently now, so if we can have these discussions in greater number, we can make progress.

I actually think the question of social mobility is one of the most troubling in our profession, and perhaps the most tricky to solve. It is also one that affects the BAME community disproportionately.

But I am hopeful. We're seeing the results of our recruitment efforts starting to pay off – 26% of our trainees in London are now from BAME backgrounds. If we can get enough people to come through who are talented – which they will be, of course – and if we provide an environment where they can thrive, it will make us a much stronger firm.

*“It was actually my kids who really brought the issue of diversity into sharp focus for me at my 50th birthday party. They pointed out that there were no black people at the party apart from their Mum.”*

Fundamentally, this is so important because diversity is good for our business. We talked about this recently at our global partners' conference – the need to ensure we have different people who bring different ways of thinking to our firm – and there's a real appetite to make more progress.

Having greater diversity also makes life and work more fun and more interesting. We have that in London which is, after all, why we love to live here.

*“Having greater diversity makes life and work more fun and more interesting.”*

Paul Flanagan – Partner



# Diverse workforces perform better



**In June this year, we launched our new BAME network, Race and Ethnicity @ A&O. I'm a member of the network's committee and was genuinely excited to see the turnout of colleagues to support the launch. It shows me that ethnic diversity is a priority for people here.**

I see the challenges facing our network as being a continued effort to improve access to the profession and – perhaps the bigger challenge – retaining diverse talent so that improvements at the junior end don't amount to a false dawn.

A key part of this lies in mentoring and sponsorship, and I hope the network will help junior BAME colleagues to meet mentors.

It's not always possible to find mentors with an identical background, so it's less a case of focusing on a cultural or ethnic identity, and more a case of looking for someone in a role that interests you and who is willing to share their experiences.

*“Growing up outside of my own country and culture meant I always had to adapt. That's taught me to be open-minded and receptive to new ideas.”*

Guled Yusuf – Senior Associate



I think everyone would struggle to find someone else with the exact same background – take me for example: I was born in Switzerland to Somali parents who couldn't return home due to the civil war, so I was raised in New York, Vienna, Ottawa and Paris. I've therefore tried to look more for mentors with varied experiences and backgrounds.

I think my upbringing has taught me to consider and appreciate different perspectives. Growing up outside of my own country and culture meant I always had to adapt. That's made it easier to work with a wide variety of colleagues and clients. I hope it's also taught me to be open-minded and receptive to new ideas. That's why I believe so strongly that diverse workforces perform better.

I'm also a member of A&O's Muslim network and published an article with a colleague earlier this year about Ramadan. It's important to be more open about things like this – to explain why we fast, and to reassure colleagues that, yes, I can still attend client meetings at lunchtime.

I had a great example of this recently when a colleague asked for advice on the best time to schedule witness interviews so as to avoid inconveniencing a client during Ramadan and Eid. I thought that was an excellent example of client care and, personally, it means a lot to me to have people express an interest and show support.

We all need to play our part in learning about and adapting to people's different needs. BAME colleagues can face a number of hurdles in a traditional workplace. We are well represented at trainee level but seem to fall off at senior levels, which is something we need to try to understand better and act on.

The make up of the legal profession has evolved significantly in recent history and we have far more ethnic and gender diversity. But in order to achieve better representation at all levels, we need to make a concerted effort to ensure that we have as inclusive a work environment as possible. This will allow everyone to be themselves at work and to excel, without having to compromise their identity.

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# Difference can set you apart and work in your favour

**I spent the early years of my life in India and Yorkshire so when I arrived in London, aged ten, I had quite a ridiculous accent!**

Those early years in India came at such a formative stage of my life. As a six-year-old you're like a sponge and as a result I now read, write and speak Hindi fluently. I believe the experience made me tenacious and independent – and meant I had a deep understanding of two very distinct cultures at an early age.

Having spent my entire professional career at A&O, I feel very invested in the firm and in the issue of diversity. It's not necessarily essential to have role models that look exactly like you – lots of people who don't look like me have championed and supported me. But from a motivational point of view, I think it can be helpful to have senior role models who have similar cultural and economic backgrounds – people you can look at and say: 'if she can do it, so can I'.

*“I want these conversations to result in tangible outcomes.”*

Ash Tiwari – Senior Associate



Without that motivational spur, there's a danger that some people end up thinking progression isn't possible for them. That's a real shame because we are striving for diversity across all ranks and people want to make a reality of it.

The biggest goal for everyone at A&O, whatever their background, is to be the best they can be. I'm not taking the familiar path though. I'm a woman and a mum who's taken time out with my two children. I'm also from a minority ethnic background – sometimes it can be a challenge to find role models with such profiles.

So I enjoy playing a supportive role for younger colleagues who want to run ideas by me or talk about their aspirations. Sharing these things with others is always extremely helpful.

My advice is, right from the get go, look at the people around you. See who inspires you and talk to them about your aspirations and how you would like them to help you achieve your goals. Everyone likes to help and, if you don't ask, you don't get.

Increasingly my heritage is playing a role in my practice, particularly being part of A&O's India Group. It's a chance to connect with Indian clients, to try and win business for the firm and to explain what A&O's long-term ambitions in India are.

Difference can set you apart and work in your favour so use your uniqueness as best you can.

I'm glad that we have started important and much needed conversations about race. People can feel awkward talking about it – they might, for fear of causing offence, steer clear of asking a question like: 'Can you explain Diwali?' or 'Why is your son named after a Hindu god?'

But asking questions is a way to get to know someone and build a rapport, both with people in the firm and with clients.

I want these conversations to result in tangible outcomes. It will take time, but if in five or ten years we can look back to 2018 and say this is what we set out to do, and this is precisely what we've done, that would be a great achievement.

*“My advice is, look at the people around you. See who inspires you and talk to them about your aspirations and how you would like them to help you achieve your goals.”*

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FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:

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## London

Allen & Overy LLP  
One Bishops Square  
London  
E1 6AD  
United Kingdom

Tel +44 20 3088 0000  
Fax +44 20 3088 0088

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## GLOBAL PRESENCE

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