

Meeks champions workplace inclusiveness in Central Florida

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The top priority for **Mary Meeks'** eponymous law firm is to help Central Floridians who have suffered discrimination in the workplace based on things such as race, sexual orientation, religion or gender.

Meeks first wanted to become a prosecutor in high school, after a friend of her brother's was murdered. Upon entering law school, her eyes were opened to all the different areas of law, and she found that she preferred constitutional and civil rights law. "I think people who don't come from lawyer families assume everything is like Matlock. That it's all criminal defense and prosecution," she said. "But that just isn't true."

Meeks, who has been a lawyer for 23 years, formed her own firm in May to have greater freedom with the cases she took. "I want to use my time and talents to be an advocate in the community on LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender] and other civil rights."

Define diversity: The existence and recognition of different types of individuals and cultures in society, in the workplace and in the success of companies.

Why companies must deal with diversity issues: Some laws have certain requirements related to diversity. It's also a strategy for success, as it attracts employees, fosters customer loyalty and helps with peer recognition.

How diversity training differs from multicultural and race-relations training: Multicultural and race-relations are a smaller subset of diversity as a whole. Larger diversity incorporates sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, age, marital status, even personality types.

Biggest diversity mistake companies make: Focusing only on quota representations of traditional minorities like race and gender, rather than all types.

Why accommodations for disabilities and religious observances are not considered special treatment: Constitutional provisions require that religious expression be accommodated. And Congress passed laws that include disabilities in civil rights protection. They include providing reasonable accommodations for people with disabilities who are otherwise capable of doing their jobs.

Newest law related to diversity workplace practices: Locally, the human rights ordinance passed in November in Orlando that protects people from discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

Key policies companies need to ensure a diverse workplace:

- Anti-discrimination.
- Regular diversity training.
- Recruitment of minorities and other diverse individuals.
- Flexible work laws for various disabilities.
- Health care coverage that includes domestic partner benefits.
- Reflecting diversity in advertising.
- Inclusive representation in all levels of business.
- Policies directed toward networking and mentoring for diverse groups.
- Assessing and tracking diversity policy success.

The diversity topic getting the most attention these days: LGBT. Central Florida is working to implement a domestic partnership registry, which would allow same-sex and unmarried opposite-sex couples who live together to have rights such as hospital and jail visitation.

How to tell if a company is doing a good job with diversity: Look at their policies and representation at various levels of leadership, committees and other employees. Who do you see? Are the employees comfortable and accepted?

Why companies should support diverse suppliers and vendors: It fosters involvement in the community. Partnering with minorities is a good strategy. You're helping minority partners become more visible, but also helping yourself as well. The bottom line: It's good business.

Mary Meeks

Title: Civil rights attorney, **Mary Meeks PA.**

Age: 47.

Birthplace: Fayetteville, N.C.

Education: Bachelor's and law degrees, Campbell University.

Hobbies: Concerts; tennis; and I used to scuba dive.

First job ever: Waitress at Farrell's Ice Cream Parlour.

Best thing I ever ate: A chocolate souffle from Roy's.