Diversity is more than “checkbox” demographics. This may seem obvious, but I think it’s an important point that is often overlooked. Organizations often take a narrow view of diversity by focusing on things like the gender and racial composition of various groups. These are important and definitely worthy of consideration. However, diversity is about more than the boxes a person is able to check off on a demographic survey. It also includes the different experiences, perspectives, and viewpoints that people can contribute.

This second type of diversity—let’s call it “experiential diversity”—can encompass things like academic background, work history, cultural competency, and personality, to name just a few. It is especially important for professional service providers, such as law firms and legal departments. We can provide more effective legal advice to our clients when we have a better understanding of the contexts in which they function. In turn, we can often get a better understanding of such situations by seeking guidance from colleagues with different backgrounds. For illustrative purposes, I think my own background can provide a couple of examples.

In another life, I was in training to be a cognitive psychologist and pursue a career in academia. I worked as a research assistant for three years in college and then enrolled in graduate school in Northern Ireland to study the cognitive psychology of religion and morality. Through my training, I gained significant experience with statistics and experimental design. While I decided to leave that graduate program behind and follow a different career path, I now draw from those skills in my legal practice. Working with a class and collective action defense team, for example, I have been able to help decipher and find weaknesses in the opinions of plaintiffs’ statistical experts. The team can use this information to depose the expert more effectively and incorporate stronger substantive analysis into our legal briefing.

Likewise, I had the wonderful experience of working in-house for a major academic health system through a legal fellowship. From a technical perspective, I learned that clients greatly appreciate it when they receive legal advice in something that at least resembles plain English. From a substantive perspective, I learned how labor and employment issues were only one piece of a much larger puzzle composed of a wide variety of regulatory, risk management, accreditation, and business concerns that govern health care institutions. In other words, I gained a better understanding of the context in which advice for health care clients would be interpreted and implemented. And I can provide that perspective to others working with similar clients.

Third, I have a basic familiarity with many of the issues that affect the LGBT community. It may sound surprising, but basic exposure to some of the ideas and discussions in that community has helped my legal practice. Once, I had a client
contact me about concerns with a gender-specific dress code their organization was implementing. However, they worked in a jurisdiction where gender identity and gender expression were protected categories under local municipal law. My existing familiarity with the issue helped me explain the basic contours of those categories and how the dress code at issue would be affected.

While these are just a couple of examples of experiential diversity, I hope they help illustrate the larger point that diversity is about more than demographic checkboxes. Just as I am able to provide distinct perspectives and insights, I benefit from those of my colleagues. Diversity, in this broader sense, is about the different strengths people can provide based on their unique perspectives, insights, and life experiences. This is true whether it comes from someone’s education, cultural background, work history, race, gender, sexuality, or any other life experience that affects their perspective. When these come together, we’re often able to get a better understanding of the context in which our clients function, and provide better advice as a result.

In short, my message is simple and straightforward: When talking about diversity, let’s look beyond the boxes and dig a bit deeper.