

2021 ACC Top 10 30-Something: Aida W. Babalola

Interviews and Profiles



The ACC Top 10 30-Somethings awards recognize in-house counsel between the ages of 30 and 39 for their innovation, global perspectives, proactive practice, advocacy efforts, and pro bono and community service work.



When asked what she enjoys about her role at PepsiCo, Aida W. Babalola shares, “Taking care of our people and the communities that we work in and serve — that aspect of the work feeds my soul.”

In 2019, the multinational food, snack, and beverage corporation launched “Winning with Purpose” — a rebranded mission focused on sustainability and spurring prosperity in communities like those where their employees live and work. A year later, faced with the coronavirus pandemic causing devastation to individuals, communities, and organizations worldwide, Aida relied on this purpose to keep employees safe and help the business continue operations.

As senior legal director, global employment law, Aida led PepsiCo’s efforts to track and implement the constantly changing COVID-19 restrictions in its operating locations across all 50 US states. She built processes from scratch, developing a nationwide SharePoint database that was updated nightly to reflect mask and PPE requirements, symptom screening practices, travel restrictions, stay-at-home orders, curfews, and vaccine rollouts — all at the state, county, and city level.

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The aggregated information also allowed Aida to notice trends in coronavirus regulatory responses and proactively make changes to PepsiCo’s operating procedures. For example, when symptom screening was first introduced in California, Aida developed a QR code-based questionnaire for employee health screening that alerted HR of symptom confirmations and triggered contact tracing. The tool is now used in PepsiCo facilities across the country. Based on these trends and others, Aida drafted the corporation’s COVID-19 leave policy, which offered paid quarantine and high-risk leave.

While the 16+ hour days at the start of the pandemic were exhausting, knowing that the top priority was the safety of the employees and the public “made it easy for you to keep coming back,” she says.

Even before the pandemic, Aida was looking for ways to make employees’ lives easier. She created an HR documents template bank to drive consistency and efficiency across the organization. In tandem, she organized monthly webinar trainings on employment law for Human Resources Business Partners (HRBPs) in the United States and Canada. She explains that rather than taking away the human aspect, streamlining these processes gives her team and HRBPs “more time to focus on the human aspect.”

The human aspect was tested this past year in the United States. Not only was the country enduring some of the highest COVID rates in the world, but it was also was rocked by the killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and the ensuing calls for racial equity. “2020 was a hard year to be a Black employment lawyer,” Aida says. She was navigating her own experience as a Black woman in America while also being a key advisor to PepsiCo on caring for employees, implementing action plans as part of its Racial Equality Journey, and serving as legal counsel to the global Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) function. While it was personally challenging, she always felt supported by her colleagues, in large part because “they didn’t shy away from courageous

conversations.”

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Aida also finds support and personal enrichment in organizations like the Network of Empowered Women (NEW) Roundtable — a nonprofit organization with a mission to drive the inclusion and advancement of Black women attorneys through targeted relationship-building, professional development initiatives, and mentoring. Aida knows firsthand how important representation can be. As a first-generation Ethiopian American and the first in her family to work in corporate America, Aida shares she “got by on the good grace of mentors. They could have said no or ignored that email, but they didn’t. And because they didn’t, look at where I am now. And I have a responsibility to pay that back.”

Aida takes that responsibility seriously, participating in formal mentoring programs like Community in Schools of North Texas, Girls, Inc., and Big Brothers Big Sisters. She is also on the steering committee of the National Employment Law Council’s In-house Career Accelerator Program, which provides career development to new employment in-house counsel from historically underrepresented communities.

“Some work takes energy from you; some work gives you energy,” Aida says, reflecting on the challenges of last year and her hopes for the year ahead. “This is the type of work that gives you energy.”

Read more about the 2021 Top 30-Somethings

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