



Elana Nightingale Dawson, Partner

Education (degrees & institutions): JD, Northwestern University School of Law

Words you live by: First things first

Personal Philosophy: If not me, then who?

What was your first job? Assistant in a law firm

Interests: Things I can do with my kids—e.g., horseback riding; Rubik's Cube and clock puzzle competitions

Family: Married with 3 children—ages almost 13, 10, and 2.5

What can be done to increase diversity in STEM fields?

Enhancing diversity in STEM fields requires recognizing that diversity encompasses all underrepresented communities. Inclusivity cannot be viewed in a vacuum; we must be comprehensive in our approach to ensure the reflection of all types of diversity, from race to gender to disability, to name a few.

In so doing, it is critical that we find opportunities, such as the Profiles in Diversity Journal, to showcase both the myriad ways people can pursue STEM careers and the diversity of those who do so. The former allows us to challenge and expand the traditional narrative of what STEM careers look like. And the latter shows those considering STEM careers that there is a place in STEM for people from all backgrounds and walks of life.

Finally, it is incumbent on those of us in STEM fields to use our positions and the opportunities we have received to hold the door open for those coming up behind us. Whether that means taking a law student out for coffee, mentoring a colleague, or advocating for better policies, it is our responsibility to keep the promotion of diversity—in all of its facets—front of mind.

Describe your experiences as a woman in a STEM career.

I am not someone whose background screams STEM and, even now, it sometimes feels foreign to describe myself as a “woman in a STEM career.” That said, I think it is important to continue to highlight the myriad ways one can find themselves in a STEM career. For me, that meant pursuing a legal practice that I found interesting and fulfilling—that of a litigator who focuses on copyright and content-related matters. My clients thus include many of the world's top technology companies, which I represent in matters involving everything from online platform usage to the development of cutting-edge technology. As a litigator, I frequently find myself having to explain my clients' highly technical products and services to those, like me, who do not have a STEM background. In my view, that makes my non-STEM background a strength because I am particularly attuned to the questions that my audience—whether a judge or a jury—is likely to have.

My experience and path to a STEM career speaks to how moving beyond rigidly defined categories can increase diversity within STEM, and why STEM represents a big tent with room for an array of skills and perspectives. By changing the narrative around what constitutes a STEM career and how one might pursue such a career, we increase the likelihood that those looking at potential career paths see a home for themselves within the STEM field as well.