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Is it time to establish a chief diversity officer at your company?

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Is now the prime time to establish a chief diversity officer at your workplace?

It's an important question, but perhaps not the top consideration for you as an owner, executive or leader at your organization.

"I think having someone identified in that position isn't necessarily as important as having someones, and hopefully someones plural, who are really focused on helping their organization thrive on this topic," says Justin Outling, a partner and the director of diversity and inclusion at Brooks Pierce, one of the Triad's largest law firms.

Outling, who is one of the few black partners at his firm and also a city councilman, recognizes the importance of the position, but said the duties outweigh the title. Companies and employers of all sizes must make it a priority to have an honest and thorough plan for diversity and inclusion, particularly at a time when the line between personal and professional lives becomes hard to distinguish.

And the best way to go about that, experts say, is to have an executive dedicated to the issue. The position may have different



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Justin Outling is the director of diversity and inclusion at Brooks Pierce in Greensboro, a leadership role that has surged over the past several years.

titles based on the organization at hand, but the substance and importance of the role remain the same. And a fast-growing role at that.

Rapidly growing role

Zoominfo, a software as a service company, found that the role of an executive diversity and inclusion officer has increased by 113% over the past decade.

The SaaS company also found that, among Fortune 500 companies, the number of positions hired in leading diversity and inclusion roles tripled from about 500 in the first half of 2020 to about 1,500 by the end of the year.

But deciding whether your company needs to establish that position isn't easy, said Lenora Billings-Harris, CEO of Greensboro-based UbuntuGlobal and a diversity strategist. While there is never an exact blueprint or length of time that it will take, the constant among companies succeeding with diversity and inclusion initiatives is commitment, she said.

That means, generally speaking, that the role of a chief diversity officer should report to the CEO and be in the C-suite, Billings-Harris said.

For a while, the standard was that a company of at least 1,000 employees would have enough demands to justify a full-time, executive-level position dedicated to diversity, equity and inclusion.

"There is no magic to that number, though," Billings-Harris said.

The reality at most companies, Billings-Harris said, is that the weight of D&I — all that it encompasses and requires to be fully functional — ends up being thrown on the desk of the human resources director.

HR directors are experts and well-versed in many things, but the nuances of D&I are usually not among those things, she said. Adding D&I oversight for someone who already has a full-time job with HR responsibilities just overburdens that individual, she said,

and could hinder attainment of diversity, equity and inclusion goals.

Consider the costs

For many employers, the cost of adding a new executive position is a real consideration, particularly in 2020 and today when the Covid-19 pandemic is putting pressure on the finances of many employers.

Weber Shandwick, a public relations firm, estimated in a 2019 “Chief Diversity Officers Today” report that U.S. businesses lose a total of \$6.786 billion per month as employees quit due to dissatisfaction with their company’s D&I efforts. Two-thirds of the executives who participated in the study strongly agreed that D&I is a significant driver of financial performance.

Businesses considering creating a D&I officer must first identify the goals they need to achieve and formulate a strategic plan based on that. The plan doesn’t have to be fully completed, but once they start, they’ll begin to realize just how much work is involved and that’s when they can begin to assess if they need to establish a chief diversity officer.

However, Billings-Harris said if a company has no experience working in the area of D&I, the best route should be to bring in a consultant to get the ball rolling. At the same time, employers who already have such positions may also bring in consultants to stave off stagnation.

“Sometimes I work with organizations to help them identify whether or not they need a chief diversity officer. Sometimes I work with organizations where they already have one and they even already have a counsel, but now they need more direction,” Billings-Harris said.

Outling has operated in his role as director of diversity and inclusion since August of last year and is the first person to hold the position for Brooks Pierce.

In addition to his day-to-day operations, which include supervising all of the firm’s D&I efforts, Outling has served on the Brooks Pierce diversity and inclusion committee since 2015.

Outling said D&I has been a priority at Brooks Pierce for at least the past three years. But for the past two-and-a-half years, the firm has engaged a consultant to assess D&I implementation. Outling's role as the director of D&I is to ensure those recommendations are implemented. He also serves as a resource for colleagues in different departments and functions across the law firm.

"I think, oftentimes when persons have a certain familiarity or share similar characteristics or backgrounds, you know, they tend to give people who they identify with better feedback," Outling said.

"And so, what we've done over the course of the past couple of years is ensure that every person gets great feedback that they can use to help grow their careers. Not leaving it to happenstance."

Ivan Canada, executive director of the National Conference for Community & Justice (NCCJ) of the Piedmont Triad, feels the addition of CDOs, or similar officers, is a movement that will continue to grow for some time. What was once the domain of larger corporations, like Bank of America or Wells Fargo, has now trickled down to smaller businesses with much fewer than the 1,000-employee threshold that was once the standard.

"I think it'll be a trend that we will continue to see going forward at organizations, even small organizations," Canada said.

"I think the next challenge is figuring out what are they responsible for, what are their performance indicators or measurement indicators for them to know if they're having success in the work and making the difference that they say they want to make at an organization," Canada said.

Companies need to take a look in the mirror and discover if they are accurately reflecting the community they serve. Johnny Sigers, named as the director of diversity and inclusion at Samet Corp. in November, is doing exactly that.

Sigers said with each project that Samet undertakes, it contracts 40% of the project to minority-owned businesses in the Triad.

"If you've got a \$40 million job and you've got 50 trade packages and you know in the Triad area you have at least 40% minorities in

the community that can do that work, you set the goal on that,” Sigers said.

Sigers said Samet Corp. has been focused on diversity inclusion for 15 years and has continuously explored challenges that exist and how to solve them.

“If last year the challenge was bonding, then you put a class in place. If the next year, the challenge is plan reading, we go to a plan reading course,” Sigers said. “Developing our contractors college has helped us keep from being stagnant.”

And now, the company is looking to substantially increase its efforts for the year ahead.

“The goal would be to have over 50% [minority participation] on all our projects across the board,” Sigers said.

Experts say such strategies are what separate pandering cliches from real change in the way companies conduct business, both internally and externally.

Companies must first start the quest for true diversity, equity and inclusion by looking inward. Then, take those findings to make external change.

“Now is the time to look at your employee demographics, and your leadership demographics in particular, because that’s usually where there’s not as much diversity as there should be. So, look at those demographics and ask yourself, ‘Why are there not more?’ And be willing to explore the answers,” Billings-Harris said.

“Once you get the answers, meaning once you identify where those barriers are, then just make a commitment to do things to disrupt those barriers and we will ultimately get to diversity of thought, which is what all of this is about ultimately because that makes all of us stronger and better.”

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