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RACE, EQUITY AND BUSINESS

Workforce leaders look towards improving diversity, equity and inclusion

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In a city where minority communities have become the majority of the population, workforce diversity leaders are advocating for an enhanced focus on hiring employees with diverse backgrounds, investing in the city's cultural offerings and cultivating diverse talent pipelines to narrow the gap in leadership opportunities available to minorities.

More Boston-area companies are realizing that diversifying their recruitment pools and fostering paths for growth for minorities is beneficial to their performance — but there is much more work to be done.



RAIJA VAISANEN; GARY HIGGINS; CLAUDIA GREEN; JUAN LOPERA; GETTY IMAGES

Clockwise from left: Raija Vaisanen, Sheena Collier, Claudia Green, Juan Lopera and Colette Phillips.

This article, first published in the BBJ's Weekly Edition, is part of the Business Journal's efforts to convene community leaders and experts to share insights on how a diverse employee base and suppliers adds value to companies and our communities.

“I want people in businesses to not think of diversity and inclusion as a zero-sum game,” said [Colette Phillips](#), president of [Colette Phillips Communications](#) and founder of [Get Konnected!](#), an inclusive business networking platform. “Everybody loses in the racial-equity gap. If these gaps are closed today, \$5 trillion could be added to the GDP over the next five years.”

By making their recruitment processes more inclusive, companies can tap in to a massive unexplored sector of talent that is frequently ignored through traditional pipelines and scouting efforts. Here's what local experts say can be done to promote a diverse pipeline of job applicants.

Build a talent pipeline

[Juan Lopera](#), corporate business diversity officer at Tufts Health Plan and Harvard Pilgrim Health Care, said he's found success using a diverse slate policy in choosing candidates to interview for managerial positions. At least two of the candidates called to interview for any given position must be people of color, one of who must be Black.

“We have not had to compromise the quality of the candidates or the process of hiring, it has only made people get out of their comfort zones and we’ve found some great people because of it,” he said. “One big concern people had was, it would take a long time because there’s not a lot of qualified people out there. But we’ve been keeping a close look at the time it takes for someone to get hired, and that hasn’t been compromised.”

Lopera said policies like this one can help build a talent pipeline for minorities to acquire leadership and managerial roles, but he insists more investment is necessary within the general community to make it work.

“It’s a systemic issue that is not going to be solved overnight,” he said. “We need to start way earlier in the pipeline, develop talent as early as at four years old. Most organizations don’t think that far back. But it’s important to look into investing in early education and childhood development programs to provide equal opportunity.”

[Raija Vaisanen](#), associate director at the Massachusetts Workforce Association, said state programs such as [Work to Thrive](#) — a

MassHire initiative that trains marginalized workers and addresses systemic racial inequities — are essential in the pursuit of a more diverse workforce. She said minority workers have been the hardest hit by the pandemic, and the association is working to assist with their recovery from the recession.

“There are structural inequities that need to be addressed,” Vaisanen said. “Black and Brown communities, immigrants, and gig workers need particular attention to have an equitable recovery. We want to make sure that people from all backgrounds have opportunities for good jobs.”

However, Phillips said educational pipelines are no longer enough, insisting there are many people of color qualified for leadership positions, and that the next step is for companies to decide to recruit them for the high-ranking positions they have the experience to succeed in.

“We are past pipelines. What I think companies need to do is start diversifying their board, investing in their future employees,” she said. “I don’t want companies to run away from this by saying they have pipelines and apprenticeships. We have senior level people. We need to put them in positions of power.”

'Recruitment marketing'

Sheena Collier is the founder and CEO of The Collier Connection, a company that helps businesses diversify their client, supplier and employee base, while creating a networking community for Black professionals. She said companies need to look beyond their hiring practices to truly commit to diversity, equity and inclusion in the workplace.

“Something that I haven’t seen companies here do as much is focusing more on recruitment marketing. There has to be more brand affinity built,” she said. “There are a lot of businesses and companies here, but a lot of people just don’t feel like they are places where they want to work – they don’t see Black leadership in those places, or cultural values that reflect their own.”

Collier said it is not only businesses that are failing to draw the attention of Black professionals, it is also the city’s overall culture.

“There’s a lack of a vibrant Black culture here. That goes a long way in influencing where people choose to live and work,” she said. “We need more spaces that are centered around Black people’s experiences, that are safe places of belonging for us.”

Claudia Green is the executive director of English for New Bostonians, a non-profit that seeks to help employers provide English language classes to immigrants working for them, so they can gain the skills necessary to advance through the company and secure higher-level jobs. She said addressing barriers of entry like language skills is essential in creating more equitable opportunities in Boston’s workforce.

“It’s not enough to have immigrants working in the back of the house, and sort of be invisible in the workplace and not really bring on their whole selves into the workplace,” she said. “It’s not just a feel-good gesture, it’s a business imperative. If you don’t have workers who are able to engage, you are losing incredible amounts of talent, and blocking a path forward.”

For many business leaders, efforts to promote workplace diversity are the next step in advancing local innovation, development and success in local industries. Collier said these efforts must go beyond companies and into the city as a whole.

“Boston is a leader in the country among many things, but we really lag behind on how we promote the visibility of Black and brown culture here and ensure that people feel like they are fully contributing to the city,” she said. “We need to make sure we’re becoming a more welcoming and inclusive community.”

