Building a more diverse, equitable and inclusive workforce
Embracing DEI is simply smart business for banks

By now, the diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) landscape in U.S. financial services is well-mapped—while the lower levels of the hierarchy more closely resemble the society at large, the upper reaches remain disproportionately white and male.

A U.S. House of Representatives committee report, released in early 2020, used data provided by the nation’s four-dozen largest banks ($50 billion+ in assets) to determine that the executive ranks in the typical bank is 70 percent male and 80 percent white. The breakdown for boards of directors is similarly skewed.

The current national focus on addressing inequality includes the financial industry. Many banks are making public commitments to create more diverse and inclusive workspaces. There is a growing commitment among top executives, financial institutions are developing and improving educational programs, and employees are more willing to have difficult conversations.

BAI is part of that progress-seeking effort. In June, we identified DEI as a key initiative, launched the DEI Resource Center, enhanced our research and training, and started hosting monthly executive roundtables that bring together banking leaders to share their experiences and best practices. And our CEO, Debbie Bianucci, is leading from the front, joining other prominent voices pushing the industry to move faster and more broadly on DEI.

This month’s Executive Report is centered on diversity, equity and inclusion in hiring, nurturing and promoting talent in financial services. With close to half of millennials and Gen Z being minorities, the business case for DEI is becoming ever clearer.

In our lead article, contributing writer Amy George points out that the effects of COVID-19 threaten some of the more significant gains made in recent years, particularly by women, people of color and other less-represented groups. With two-thirds of employees working from home, many are balancing childcare and educational responsibilities as a result of pandemic-related school closures.

Her conversations with bankers and industry experts yielded a number of suggestions on how banks and credit unions can move forward in their DEI efforts, beginning with casting a broader reach in recruiting, hiring and promoting is vital, but also important is cultivating a diverse client base.

Contributing writer James A. Anderson tells us that ERGs also serve as intermediaries between workers and management—sometimes conveying complaints, and at other times making suggestions or advocating viewpoints. Given the turmoil of 2020, it should come as little surprise that enrollment in ERGs has surged at financial services organizations.

One diversity consultant told Anderson that ERGs may play ever more important roles as the nation and workforce become more diverse, and that those who emerge as leaders within ERGs may be well-positioned for corporate leadership positions. “The role of running organizations like these makes you a change agent. ... The expertise and responsibilities involved translate into a formidable set of skills.”

Another area subject to change given the growing emphasis on DEI is the annual performance review. Contributing writer Karen Epper Hoffman explains that a shortcoming in the current structure is the overweighting of white males in the managerial ranks in banking, which often leads them to “groom up-and-coming employees who look like them. Hence, women, people of color and other less-represented groups are often working at an inherent disadvantage.”

She collected a range of ideas from bankers and consultants on how performance assessment may be revamped to more appropriately train and then evaluate a diverse workforce.

Another suggestion is revisit mission statements and strategic goals with an eye toward DEI, while another is to better manage career paths by matching new employees with senior-level “sponsors” in the organization.

Within these ideas and others expressed in this Executive Report, bank and credit union leadership can find the business benefits of placing DEI among their institution’s core values.
6 opportunities for banks to improve DEI

BY AMY GEORGE

A broader reach in recruiting, hiring and promoting is vital, but also important is cultivating a diverse client base.
This is a critical moment for corporate America. Companies risk losing women in leadership.

“WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE,” MCKINSEY & COMPANY AND LEAN IN

At a time when a pandemic is intersecting with a social justice movement, diversity, equity and inclusion have perhaps never been more top-of-mind for corporations, including financial institutions.

Talk and awareness are easy; real change is harder. And anyone in banking, from C-suite executives to branch tellers, will acknowledge this. Real change is slow going.

Behind each of the three letters of DEI are big questions:

» How do banks achieve diversity in their workforces, especially when COVID-19 has disproportionately sidelined women and others?

» How do banks ensure equity in everything from career opportunities for employees to mortgage loan access for a more diverse client base?

» How do banks create environments that foster inclusion, where everyone—team members and the communities they serve—feels they have the opportunity to thrive?

Take the representation of women in corporate America. Between 2015 and 2020, the trend was inching in the right direction, particularly in senior management, according to the 2020 report “Women in the Workplace,” by McKinsey & Company and Lean In. Women occupied 28 percent of senior vice president roles (up from 23 percent) and 21 percent of the C-suite (up from 17 percent).

COVID-19 threatens those gains as women, especially women of color, are more likely than men to be laid off or furloughed—or because of their care-giving roles, they have no choice but put their careers on hold, the two groups say in the report.

“This is a critical moment for corporate America. Companies risk losing women in leadership—and future women leaders—and unwinding years of painstaking progress toward gender diversity,” the report says. “This crisis also represents an opportunity.”

Here are six opportunities for banks aiming to do a better job when it comes to DEI in 2020 and beyond.

DIVERSIFY HOW YOU RECRUIT AND HIRE

Diversity can mean not just who you hire, but also where you find them, says Ricky Otey, executive vice president and chief operating officer of Sharonview Federal Credit Union, based outside Charlotte, North Carolina. Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, Sharonview has hired employees displaced from hospitality and other industries.

“There are many different applicants than you would have expected in the marketplace today,” he says. “We were able to look for and find talented individuals who hadn’t thought of making the shift to financial services.”

Detroit-based Ally Financial partners with Campus Pride to recruit LGBTQ+ talent for its summer internship, early talent and direct hire programs, as well as with high school and university programs that support and promote diverse talent. For example, at Wayne State University in Detroit, Ally sponsors the first-generation college student mentoring program.

Of course, rethinking recruiting is easier for entry-level positions, while the lack of diversity in the higher echelons of banking has been the greater concern. When it comes to higher-level roles, it will no doubt take more work. It might mean reaching out to women’s networking groups or African American chambers of commerce.

Jim Pendergast, senior vice president and general manager at Birmingham, Alabama-based AltLINE, a division of The Southern Bank Company, offered another thought: “One of the biggest challenges I see in...
We are especially focused on advancing women and increasing racially and ethnically diverse talent in leadership roles.

Kimberly Moore-Wright, Truist

The upward pipeline is widening the paths to CEO. For example, a CEO is typically promoted from a select few C-suite positions, such as CFO or COO. By the way, women are severely underrepresented in these C-suite positions. To solve this problem, a company would do well to make it a policy to promote CEO candidates from the entire C-suite, not just the traditional roles.

GET TO KNOW YOUR PEOPLE AND LEAD WITH EMPATHY

Otey, the COO of Sharonview, encourages leaders and managers to get to know their employees so well that they’re able to know what they need to do great work and get ahead. It could be extra training or a flexible work arrangement. But you don’t know if you don’t get to know your people one-on-one, which can be key to retaining diverse ranks.

“We just finished putting all of our leadership through special training on coaching, development and better listening skills,” Otey says. “It’s important to focus on the total employee and what it takes for that employee to be successful—and then I can figure out how I can best deliver on that for the employee.”

The McKinsey and Lean In report also pushes for more humanity in the workplace, saying, “If companies make significant investments in building a more flexible and empathetic workplace—and there are signs that this is starting to happen—they can retain the employees most impacted by today’s crises and create more opportunities for women to succeed in the long term.”

QUANTIFY YOUR GOALS

Truist, the Charlotte-based bank formed by the merger of BB&T and SunTrust, has a dedicated DEI office focused on recruiting, retaining and promoting diverse talent. The firm also has numbers it’s aiming for.

“We are especially focused on advancing women and increasing racially and ethnically diverse talent in leadership roles,” says Kimberly Moore-Wright, Truist’s chief human resources officer. “Our target is to increase ethnic diversity of senior leadership from 11.9 percent to 15 percent in three years and promote pay equity by conducting regular external, independent and expert equity reviews.”

BE TRANSPARENT

“The talk around race and inclusion and equity has never been greater,” says Bhushan Sethi, joint global leader, people and organization at PwC in New York. “This is all incredibly well-intended, but progress is going to be difficult. There are some small steps you can make.”

And one of those small—but crucial—steps, he says, is transparency. There needs to be transparency when it comes to gender pay gaps, Sethi said. He noted that companies in Europe are required to report on gender pay gaps, but there is no such requirement in the United States.

There also needs to be greater transparency in hiring. Sethi pointed to a Bloomberg report in early October on corporate racial data. Since late May, 87 of the S&P 100 index companies had issued a statement on racial justice. But as of June, only 25 percent were willing to publish a full copy of the annual equal employment opportunity report that they must file with the federal government. Many of the companies that shared their EEO-1 forms had done so for the first time, and others had never disclosed them before providing them to Bloomberg.

“We still have work to do on the transparency piece,” Sethi says.
**USE ANALYTICS TO IMPROVE DEI**

Analytics can be a catalyst for achieving lofty DEI goals, says Charyn Faenza, principal industry consultant at SAS. Companies can use artificial intelligence to look internally for subtle patterns that uncover hidden biases in hiring, promotion or compensation. Likewise, companies can look for patterns of hidden bias externally—for example, in how they make lending decisions or conduct sales prospecting.

“There are great benefits to employing analytics. However, it is important to note that poorly trained AI algorithms can have the opposite effect of amplifying prejudice,” Faenza says. “There’s a big difference between black-box and white-box AI. Governance and model management are also essential considerations.”

**DIVERSIFY INWARD AND OUTWARD**

One of the most natural ways to cultivate diversity is to focus on customers or on those you want to become customers, says PwC’s Sethi. He believes the banks that will emerge as DEI leaders will do so because of the culture they create inside and outside their branches.

“What I am optimistic about are the banks that are taking a customer lens to this,” he says. “The best way to impact diversity is to provide economic opportunity by providing lending to diverse businesses, by taking customers from diverse communities.”

There is reason to be encouraged and much work to be done. “I am encouraged by the fact that the business community, including banks, is talking about systemic racism,” says Sethi. “I am encouraged by the dialogue and conversations and the fact that a number of our clients are saying, ‘We need help.’”

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**Amy George** is a freelance writer who lives in Charlotte, N.C. She has worked as a reporter and editor at The Associated Press and the Charlotte Observer, and in corporate communications at Wells Fargo.
Participation in employee resource groups is booming. Here's how to ensure they best serve the employees who join them.
Long a staple of diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, employee resource groups give both front-line employees and management a sense of community in the face of adversity. A number of banks have used ERGs to help employees come to grips with pandemic fears, contemplate how to respond to racial injustice and understand the impact an economy in shock is having on both bank employees and the people they serve.

Those functions have proven invaluable in 2020. Consultants and company diversity officials applaud ERGs for providing employees—women, African American, Hispanic, LGBTQ or members of other groups—with a safe haven. ERG members can air out their feelings, lift one another up and brainstorm ways to raise issues with management. In some cases, groups can even invite outside speakers to facilitate discussions for the group or for a broader, company-wide audience.

In recent months, ERGs have also given companies and executives a way to absorb the impact of multiple crises on both employees and neglected or marginalized communities, and then respond to the upheaval in a thoughtful and appropriate way. For example, a women’s ERG at U.S. Bank recently hosted a conference call on how to manage the fall restart of school and balance work and life while dealing with kids at home. Emily Koski, a U.S. Bank DEI executive, says the queue to attend the nationwide call hit the system’s 3,000-attendee maximum and generated overflow demand.

In another example from earlier this summer, as protests over the killing of George Floyd gripped the nation, members of an African American ERG at Fifth Third Bank facilitated seven initial discussions. Those initial sessions, attended by 80 employees, paved the way for two dozen more virtual gatherings and later a panel. All told, 550 employees participated to express views on civil unrest and discuss ways they thought Fifth Third could react.

ERGs also act as a liaison between underserved or overlooked groups and management. At times, they advocate for the employees they represent or alert management to complaints or dissatisfaction. In other instances, they function both as a sounding board and counsel, providing advice about ways to tackle controversy and move forward. On occasion, they can even help shape marketing messaging or community outreach efforts.

Employees are taking notice of ERGs as a place for community and inclusion. A survey by the research group WerkLabs and The Mom Project, a professional women’s advocacy group, found that 84 percent of respondents were interested in joining an ERG and that two-thirds thought an ERG would improve inclusivity at their organization.

Enrollment in ERGs has accelerated in 2020. Membership has topped 22,000 in the 10 groups that U.S. Bank sponsors. Koski says the number of employees in ERGs jumped 24 percent last year and another 15 percent in the first three quarters of 2020. According to PNC, 16,000 employees belong to one of its 11 ERGs, now spread across 90 chapters in 25 markets.

However, ERGs are still far from a fixture in corporate America. The WerkLabs-The Mom Project survey also found that, while most respondents thought ERGs were a good idea, almost 60 percent were unfamiliar with them prior to the questionnaire. Of the half of respondents who knew about ERGs, just under six in 10 said their company offers them.

ERG members can air out their feelings, lift one another up and brainstorm ways to raise issues with management.
It’s critical that ERG programs get sponsorship from the highest company levels.

CHERYL FELLS
DIVERSITY CONSULTANT

Companies that want to join the trend will find that there is no one-size-fits-all template to follow. DEI consultants like Tanya Odom say tailoring an ERG program to fit an organization’s needs has to take into account a wide array of factors, including a company’s geographic location as well as external and internal demographics.

In terms of best practices, management buy-in and participation are key. “It’s critical that ERG programs get sponsorship from the highest company levels to help champion what they do,” says diversity consultant Cheryl Fells. “Teaming ERGs with members of the C-suite or executive teams forges a greater sense of partnership and helps link them to an organization’s agenda.”

At the same time, companies need to temper their expectations. Often, that means viewing ERGs as facilitators rather than problem solvers. “A common misconception companies make is to strap ERGs with the responsibility of generating solutions,” says Bradley Benn, a diversity consultant with Russell Reynolds Associates. “That’s unfair. ERGs are there to help create a safe space and sense of community, one that leadership can tap into to get input as they set strategy.”

Financial resources and compensation are also going to matter in the long run. ERGs and their leaders—most of whom hold down a full-time job in addition to spending upwards of 10 hours a week on the group’s work—have been stretched to the limit. Diversity consultants say companies will have to enhance budgets set aside for ERG programs and find additional ways to compensate employee leaders, either in additional salary or pathways to advancement.

“The corporate-level resources ERGs get is perhaps the number-one obstacle to how effective they can be,” says Pamela Cohen of WerkLabs, who reports that many affinity groups at large corporations are allotted no more than $5,000 a year. Odom says Twitter’s decision to pay its ERG leaders may be a game changer. “It says a lot about how highly the company values the role ERGs play, particularly in a time of reckoning like this year.”

Consultants say ERGs are going to play an increasingly important role as the nation’s population becomes more diverse and that these groups can serve as incubators for future managers and organization leaders.

“My hope is that companies start to acknowledge what the heads of ERGs are doing, and that they view this as an effective source of leadership development,” says Odom. “The role of running organizations like these makes you a change agent, a leader. The expertise and responsibilities involved translate into a formidable set of skills.”

James A. Anderson is a freelance financial writer whose work has appeared in Barron’s magazine, Black Enterprise and other publications.
Tech’s role in a post-COVID work world

Expect a blend of hybrid, remote and dynamic solutions that will need the right IT infrastructure to hold it all together.

BY JANNA STEINMAN
Through hard work and innovation, leaders have found ways to protect their employees during COVID-19 and keep critical banking processes running. Now, organizations are looking toward the future and planning their post-pandemic strategies.

Many banks are re-evaluating the number of branches they need because so many customers have shifted their reliance to digital interactions. Digital transformation—which financial institutions were generally slower to implement in the past—is now hyper-accelerated. Many pre-COVID initiatives focused on automation, improving regulatory compliance and customer experience. When the pandemic hit, we at CompuCom had to move quickly to help our financial services customers resolve significant technical challenges to enable large-scale remote work. The speed of that transformation showed what’s possible, and it will change expectations going forward.

Planning for success means significantly rethinking what the future of work looks like in the financial industry and figuring out how to provide the right spaces, tools and support for the best possible employee experiences and business outcomes.

FLEXIBLE WORK IS THE FUTURE
What many organizations have learned from what the media dubbed “the world’s largest work-from-home experiment” is that allowing more flexible working arrangements has a host of benefits worth keeping, including higher productivity, increased employee satisfaction and larger talent pools. A recent Gartner poll found 82 percent of company leaders plan to allow employees to work at least part of the time remotely after COVID-19.

Few financial institutions will opt to go fully remote, but many are planning for hybrid arrangements where employees have work-from-home options. This will bring greater organizational resiliency, and studies show 76 percent of workers across all verticals want to work from home at least one day a week. There’s now a general expectation that work can be done effectively from anywhere with everyone connected via a digital office.

Seamless, secure and uninterrupted productivity is necessary in an effective digital workplace, and a big part of that is having the correct technology. That includes mobile devices, access to the necessary data and work applications, and user-friendly collaboration tools. It all has to be tied together with excellent connectivity. Financial institutions often face unique regulatory challenges around offsite data access that have to be resolved. Security solutions must address the increased threats that come with remote work so that data and users are as secure as possible.

OFFICES AND BRANCHES MAY CHANGE
With the increase in remote work, financial firms are reconsidering large central offices to benefit from the lower costs and improved resiliency associated with having smaller, suburban satellite offices located closer to employees.

And as banks weigh reducing their branch networks, thanks to more digital interactions with customers, we may see the consolidation of branches into multipurpose spaces for both office work and customer visits. However, offices and branches aren’t going away. In addition to face-to-face customer interactions, they’re needed to host activities that can’t be done remotely, or at least can’t be done very well. This could include large meetings and certain kinds of team collaboration.

Above all, offices will be wireless, seamless and flexible, so that it’s effortless to move around in them and transition from home to work, for both your employees and your customers.

The customer experience—so critical to success for financial services organizations—starts with the employee experience. Employees are a brand’s spokespersons. Experience affects productivity, morale, engagement, revenue and company culture. Remote and hybrid work change the experience paradigm, and management strategies have to account for it.
Poor technology, for example, can dramatically affect the experience of working from home or onsite in a branch. An employee having a bad experience isn’t as likely to provide a positive experience for a customer.

Leaders will have to reskill to manage remote teams effectively and create the right experiences. Organizations have to ensure that remote users are equal participants, providing the same engaging, collaborative experience as those had by onsite workers.

**OMNICHANNEL SUPPORT TO KEEP IT ALL RUNNING**

From an IT perspective, remote, hybrid and dynamic workspaces present a host of new challenges to overcome. Technology operations have to provide the same level of support to individuals, regardless of location. Essentially, IT must become user-centric instead of office- or branch-centric.

Automated IT solutions that leverage artificial intelligence and machine-learning dramatically improve user experiences. In many cases, they can fix problems before they hinder workflows. Connectivity issues, for example, often just require a device reset, and that can be sensed and done automatically.

When more is required, omnichannel support options help users in the way they want to be helped. While that could be a traditional phone conversation with a service desk technician, others may prefer smartphone apps, text, email or self-service information sources.

If problems can’t be fixed remotely, technicians can be dispatched to the user’s home, or the employee can visit a distributed support location.

While uncertainty about the future will continue, there are enough lessons learned from the pandemic to begin charting the path forward. It’s clear that flexible and more nimble ways of working are here to stay, so financial institutions must have strategies to capture the benefits of this new normal.

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A growing focus on DEI has some banks building more mentoring and career pathing into the performance review process.
It is one thing to state and outline your values and objectives—it is another to bring them to life through words and actions.

JULIA A. JOHNSON, WIPFLI

For banks, the performance review is a staple of conventional management. But in a time when so many conventions are rapidly changing, the financial industry must now rethink how it will review its employees in ways that are more inclusive and also create a better environment for the future.

In a recent article, Fast Company pointed out that the stodgy annual or bi-annual performance review—typically based on a set of rigid goals—is long overdue for a makeover at most companies. This is particularly true in banking, where older white men fill most top managerial slots and (often unconsciously) groom up-and-coming employees who look like them. Hence, women, people of color and other less-represented groups are often working at an inherent disadvantage.

One basic change has been to mandate recruiting aimed at building a more diverse workforce and then better managing the career path for those employees, according to Ellen Zimiles, partner and leader of financial services advisory and compliance at Guidehouse, an international advisory and consulting firm. “Once they are in, [banks should be] moving them into different areas, creating more of a rotation for people so that they are not stuck in one place.”

Zimiles says banks and other enterprises often succeed in grooming a better-performing, diverse employee base by “providing [new employees] with a sponsor who is accountable to be bringing people through and to introduce them around the organization.” These mentorships work best when the sponsor is “senior enough to know how to be efficient and how to be accountable.”

Some banks opting to keep traditional performance reviews are tweaking them to meet new goals. “Higher-performing banks seem to have the basics down, such as clear goal-setting tied to purpose, strategy and outcomes; frequent feedback, including manager training and accountability; clear criteria for performance against the goals; regular formal checkpoints at the mid-year and year-end; and a connection between results and rewards,” says Neil Walker-Neveras, chief talent officer for M&T Bank, a multi-state community bank with more than 690 locations on the East Coast. “These things may feel stodgy, but they work. I call them the ‘necessary but not sufficient’ elements,” Walker-Neveras adds. “And while I am usually the first person to sign up for something new, I am a little skeptical of the trend to blow it all up just for the sake of trying something new.” The standard performance review cycle, if done consistently well, he says, “is useful, especially if the most important elements such as relevant goals and frequent feedback are at the center of the process.”

WIDENING THE SPECTRUM

If a bank truly wants to expand its employee pool and its management track—and importantly, engage employees who might be female, nonwhite, younger or generally different from most of the existing managers—it needs to look at its mission, vision, values, and strategic goals and objectives, says Julia A. Johnson, director of organizational performance for Milwaukee-based consulting firm Wipfli.

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"It is one thing to state and outline your values and objectives—it is another to bring them to life through words and actions,” Johnson says. “It is difficult for individuals..."
who have not had direct experiences of being part of an underrepresented employee population to understand and relate to those challenges.”

She points out that “it takes self-awareness and proactivity of management to gain understanding of the significant benefits of having a diverse workforce. Unless the bank seeks to first understand its stated and unstated culture of inclusivity, it will be hard-pressed to cultivate sustainable change through a modified performance management process.”

Pete Cherecwich, president of asset servicing at Northern Trust, has 13 direct reports while overseeing more than 10,000 employees. He still conducts a formal, twice-yearly performance review for his direct reports. But he is also engaging his employees through virtual town halls that offer advice on how to perform better and move up. “No one ever actually tells you how to stand out compared to the person next to you,” he says. Rather than looking at conventional goals, he recommends managers look at objectives and key results. “We’re trying to get everybody to stretch themselves.”

According to a July study by Leadership IQ, based on a survey of more than 48,000 employees, managers and chief executives, only 13 percent of respondents say they find their employer’s performance appraisals useful, primarily because performance reviews are “poorly implemented.” The same study found that fewer than a third of employees say they know if they’re doing as well as they should be.

Johnson says effective performance management is a continuous process within which the employee is a fully engaged participant.

“An employee’s responsibility will be to engage in proactive discussions with their supervisor to express interest in growing their career, exploring other opportunities, and identifying what activities and learning opportunities are needed to achieve career goals,” she says. “The bank’s responsibility is to identify growth, development and career-pathing opportunities and make connections for employees within the bank to understand what it will take to advance. Gone are the days where the employer solely manages the employee’s career path.”

Karen Epper Hoffman has been writing about banking and technology issues for nearly a quarter of a century for publications including American Banker, Bloomberg Businessweek and Financial Times’ The Banker. She has also spoken and moderated panels at industry conferences.

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