Increasing diversity means taking a deeper dive into systems in place

By MATTHEW REITZ

Increasing workforce diversity and creating an inclusive environment produces a slew of positive results, but companies must commit to altering decades-old practices and reexamining hiring and retention practices in order to achieve a diverse and equitable workplace.

Diverse workplaces not only include individuals of various race and gender, but also people of different ages, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion and background. Workforce diversity can improve performance and profitability, experts say, but organizations must fully commit to pursuing diverse candidates, supporting employees and team members, recognize unconscious biases and promote a workplace culture that values difference.

Beckford

Kevin Beckford, director of staff diversity, equity and inclusion at University of Rochester, said creating a diverse, inclusive and equitable workplace can be easy, and noted "the hard part is making the conscious decision to do it."

Organizations seeking to increase diversity should form internal committees or dedicated positions tasked with implementing diversity, inclusion and equity policies, according to local experts, who say identifying why those initiatives are being adopted can be equally important.

Beckford said organizations that consider diversity as a standalone program are missing the point, noting a diverse, equitable and inclusive work force is "one of many tools that, if you use it well, can produce results."

"People look at it as a program that you go take a class and you check it off," Beckford said. "But then you're missing out on the intellect, the experience, the perspective of people who are from different backgrounds."

Building a diverse team starts well before the interview process with data collection, which can highlight diversity gaps within a workforce. Experts say, however, raw numbers don't always paint the full picture.

Kesha Carter, chief diversity officer at Coordinated Care Services Inc. (CCSI) in Rochester, said many organizations can point to statistics and present diversity, but that can be a misnomer if the diversity only exists in the low-level and front-line positions and disappears in leadership roles.

In order to realize the full benefits of a diverse workplace, Carter says organizations must dive deep into all levels of a workforce to determine what subgroups, or points of view, are missing from certain teams or ladders within an organization.

"It's about looking at what voices might be missing in a particular team or group that is functioning within an organization, and determining how you're going to use those voices once you have them at the table," Carter said. "Just having diversity doesn't matter if those folks aren't involved in the decision-making processes."

Beckford, who spent much of his career in the

Carter

banking industry, said his arrival in the diversity and inclusion space came largely because as a transition manager, diversity was an effective tool to drive change at a variety of stops throughout his career.

"It allows you to be able to address any problem, service, solution from multiple angles so you get the best possible solution," Beckford said. "When somebody says 'I want the best possible solution, answer or service,' you can't arrive at that if you have a homogeneous group."

Adrienne Collier, a diversity and inclusion program manager at ESL Federal Credit Union, said in addition to diversity of race, gender and other attributes, employers may also want to seek diversity of thought, working style and life experience.

"All of those things make up a person, who they are and how they present in the workplace," Collier said.

Once workforce diversity gaps are identified, organizations must implement hiring practices that better identify and attract diverse candidates. Collier said something as basic as how a job description is worded can stifle inclusivity and diversity, and it's important for companies to review job descriptions if leadership is fully committed to improving diversity and inclusion.

Certain education or skill requirements may create barriers to access too, Collier said, and organizations, when possible, should be more flexible in how a candidate's competency is measured.

Collier

Carter said as part of embracing diversity and equity, organizations should think about experience differently and realize that individuals often may have experiences that have not allowed them to flourish or advance, but still have experience that can be built upon. She said attributes like passion, which can't be taught, can be more important than teachable skills.

"So it's really changing the mindset and getting out of being stuck in that old hiring model and thinking really differently about who are the people you really want to bring and not just skills that you want to bring, but what kind of people do you want," Carter said.

Collier said implementing a structured interview process can help to mitigate unconscious biases in interviews, and allow companies to compare candidates fairly against established criteria. Conversational-style interviews, she said, can lead to interviewer and interviewee building a natural rapport or camaraderie with candidates from a similar background, making them seem more compatible.

"When we have that conversational type interview it's not a fair comparison and sometimes we're likely to unknowingly hire candidates who are more similar to us," Collier said, noting ESL in recent years has trained hiring managers on how to conduct interviews in a competency-based approach.

Collier suggests assembling a diverse interview team if possible, and if an organization is not yet

diverse enough to do so, a starting point is to ensure interviewers and hiring managers are trained on unconscious bias.

In addition to considering diversity during the front-end hiring process, Collier said companies should also be providing training to current team members when inserting diverse talent into an existing homogeneous group.

"If you're bringing diverse talent into a homogeneous group, the existing group needs to be aware of some of the differences that might come with having a diverse team and how to navigate those differences and use that as a strength," Collier said, adding that organizations also need to support the incoming diverse talent in order to retain those workers.

Beckford cautioned that without educating existing employees and leadership, unconscious biases can torpedo efforts to improve diversity and equity within an organization.

"If we want to help businesses to change, we first have to educate on the reason and importance of it," Beckford said.

Retaining employees and team members is equally important to hiring a diverse workforce, and organizations must work to provide existing team members with reasons to stay, such as that sense of belonging and the ability to advance in their careers.

"The other piece is to really focus on your retention efforts," Collier said. "Recruiting is good, but if you're losing your diverse employees at the same rate as they're coming into the organization, that can be indicative of an issue within your workplace culture and climate."

Diversity without inclusion and equity isn't enough, according to Beckford, who said team members must have a sense of belonging, be engaged and have a voice to be able to drive change within a company or team.

Just as data is important to identify gaps within the workforce, Collier said, the companies must also use data to identify turnover rates and other trends that could indicate issues or barriers within the organization. Those tools can include annual surveys and exit interviews, among others.

Carter said it's also important to allow open conversations centered on the way people are feeling, who they are and what experiences they bring with them. Such conversations allow team members to know more about one another than the job each performs, Carter said, in addition to unveiling biases individuals bring with them about particular identities.

"So they get to know each other as individuals and interact with each other as individuals," Carter said, noting it helps build a trusting environment.

Perhaps the most important thing companies can do, Beckford said, is pay employees a living wage. Low-level workers are often forced to work multiple jobs, but a living wage can provide additional time to further their education and progress into other roles within the company. He likened programs that offer educational opportunities to employees who aren't paid a living wage to "keys without a car."

Matthew Reitz is a Rochester-area freelance writer.