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ACCOUNTING & AUDIT

Why DEI in Accounting Firms is Everyone's Responsibility

Successfully adopting DEI practices at scale can be difficult, slow-moving, and even overwhelming. If you've run into these issues while trying to implement change, you're not alone.

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By Marcus Hayle.

Everyone has a different entry point to realizing the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion – or DEI. My journey began in the wake of George Floyd's death when

my 11-year-old daughter, who had recently moved to the U.S., saw video of police shooting at protesters on social media and asked me a question I'll never forget.

“Dad, are the police going to shoot us too because we're Black?” she asked. I was taken aback because I didn't expect the question, and as much as I would've liked to have responded, “of course not,” I wasn't so sure since I had seen multiple instances showing differently on the news. Growing up in Jamaica, where our country's motto is “Out of Many, One People,” (much like “E pluribus unum” here in the U.S.) neither of us had ever experienced this type of fear or concern.

Of course, while everyone's entry point may not be as personal as mine, most tax professionals in the U.S. today have at least heard the term DEI in their workplace. Hopefully, their companies have established a group or initiative that has helped to educate employees more on the topic.

I'm fortunate that my role allows me to keep DEI at the center of what we're doing on my team at Intuit. I've learned that while it's excellent to provide training around DEI at work, actually putting these principles into action can be easier said than done. The values of diversity, equality, and inclusion each have [their own important learnings and impacts](#), but they all come back to one thing: A personal mindset that prioritizes openness, awareness, and compassion for others.

In the accounting profession, this mindset is both critical to create an inclusive workspace, but also to deliver your clients a variety of perspectives on their finances. All this said, successfully adopting DEI practices at scale can be difficult, slow-moving, and even overwhelming. If you've run into these issues while trying to implement change, you're not alone.

DEI cannot happen in a vacuum. It requires full buy-in and participation across every team, business unit and organization. That starts with a transformative shift in thinking. Here are some ways to help make it happen at your place of business.

The Key Ingredients in the Workplace

I'm continuing to learn throughout my own journey, but can share two lessons that have been foundational to creating transformational change in my department.

Firstly, issues of injustice and inequality are a human condition, and not just the problems of one specific group. All ethnicities have experienced discrimination and/or oppression, and at some point, we all have elevated ourselves (directly or indirectly) at the expense of somebody else. It doesn't make sense to try to fix these

things in isolation, so reframing DEI as something that impacts and benefits everyone is crucial. Sitting on the fence thinking you're not affected is a fallacy. My daughter helped me to realize that. Secondly, even if some people are thrown by the term DEI itself, almost everyone *wants* to help others and do the right thing. They just don't know how or where to start.

With that in mind, here are some of the best ways to get started on actionable changes in your workplace:

Make sure everyone has a voice: Create spaces for people of all levels to use their voice to talk about issues that matter to them. This can be in the form of quarterly Q&As or AMAs – “Ask Me Anythings” – to make sure everyone is given a chance to be seen and heard. DEI conversations need to occur from the top down, and from the bottom up. This means everyone should be a leader when it comes to having a voice and telling their individual story.

Retention is as important as hiring: Conduct regular temperature checks and be open to feedback on ways to improve inclusivity among existing team members. The culture you create will determine longevity and keep employee growth at the forefront. It's everyone's responsibility, both managers and employees, to help talent succeed. If an individual is not growing professionally and personally, ask questions to find out why, and work together to find a solution. Leaders, be cognizant of your bias towards building relationships with people that look “like you,” went to the same schools, live in the same neighborhoods, or have similar interests. Intentionally seek out people who are different from you to help yourself and your employees learn and grow.

Promote transparency & openness: At Intuit, we voluntarily release [our diversity statistics](#) and encourage others to do the same. This is because we believe the transparency you put out to the world reflects your business. This idea of “walking the walk” at a corporate level also helps us with self-accountability. We strive to be open across all facets of the job. This entails actions like adding inclusive language to job listings to better reflect our employee pool and creating safe spaces where underrepresented people can feel empowered to speak and be heard.

Tie the Work Back to Supporting Clients: As tax professionals, we all have our clients' best interests in mind. The reality is that fostering a strong DEI culture at your organization will allow your employees to approach the financial situation of a diverse set of clients in a more inclusive way. The more diversity of background and thinking that is present, the better advice you can share, and the more empathy you

can show. And that goes a long way with establishing a client base that stands the test of time.

A Marathon, Not a Sprint

Every company is different, just like every individual journey and entry point is different. My daughter taught me an invaluable lesson that day in 2020: Creating a positive impact with DEI takes time. Remember that DEI is a mindset. No matter how it starts, you can advance the principle to the betterment of everyone.

Companies who sit on the fence with DEI run the risk of losing diverse thinkers and perspectives, which can negatively impact their external and internal perception, and ultimately, reduce their credibility. They also miss out on the benefits of diverse perspectives.

That is what motivates me to stay on my journey and continue to learn as much as I can. We all have so much to learn from one another, and it's just a matter of creating an environment where people feel safe to do so.

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