



The CDO of the FUTURE

The role of chief diversity officer has come a long way. Tomorrow is uncertain, but today's diversity executives have some ideas about where the profession may be heading. *By Linda Stokes and Michael Wheeler*

What does the future hold for the chief diversity officer? After all, it wasn't so long ago that the role came into existence. In the time since the first such position came into being, the role has expanded, taking on a range of issues, from the foundation of compliance to the strategic value of diversity and inclusion. Further, workplace and marketplace demographic projections in the United States have exceeded predictions, putting the role of CDO on a path to grow significantly.

To forecast how the role might evolve in the next five to 10 years, diversity executives who have worked in the field discussed who will lead the work into the next generation, what skills will be required and how the work and those who lead it might be positioned differently. They also explored who is in the pipeline for these jobs and what will attract them and retain their focus and passion. A big question is who is mentoring, encouraging, training and inspiring the next generation of diversity and inclusion leaders? What follows are their thoughts on the future of the role and the industry.

It's important to look to the future now because it is a pivotal time for the CDO role and for diversity and inclusion work. The pace of change in business and increased workforce diversity, including multiple generations in the workplace, all present challenges.

Further, with a significant number of corporate leaders retiring, there will be a changing of the guard, from those who experienced the world in one way to those who have a different perspective. To ensure their diversity leadership pipelines are well-populated, current CDOs will not only have to consider who will one day assume their roles, but also what diverse talent is available for any leadership position.



On the Web

What kind of skills and expertise do you think future diversity leaders will need? Join the *Diversity Executive* LinkedIn group and share your thoughts: [tinyurl.com/m5yyodm](https://www.tinyurl.com/m5yyodm).

The Work

Doing diversity and inclusion work in the past required a different approach from what is needed today, which is why the CDO role is an evolving proposition. David Casey, vice president of workforce strategies and chief diversity officer at drug retailer CVS Caremark, said CDOs are essentially enablers for success — for individuals, teams and organizations. “Enabling success requires understanding the past, where the work was grounded, and the future — where it is going.”

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— David Casey, vice president of workforce strategies and chief diversity officer, CVS Caremark

The past: The foundation of diversity and inclusion work was built on initiatives from a few groundbreaking companies, the civil rights movement and legislation for equal employment opportunity and affirmative action. The work was built on ensuring quality and making sure that traditionally underrepresented groups had the same access to opportunities as everyone else in the workplace. There has been a rapid shift since, however, from compliance-driven initiatives to a business-driven function, focused not just on demographics related to hiring but on strategy.

The future: David Cobbs, assistant vice president of diversity and equal employment opportunity at transportation company Norfolk Southern Corp., said future CDOs will look at diversity far more broadly. CVS’ Casey said this might include examining issues related to flexible work arrangements, the impact of social media and work-life integration, and not as much on representation issues, civil rights and social justice.

“The view of newer, younger people involved in this work is more global in nature,” said Lorie Valle-Yañez, vice president and chief diversity officer at Massachusetts Mutual Life Insurance Co. “They are not wed to traditional views and approaches, which in the future may not be relevant.”

Further, inclusion might become more virtual as technology and the proliferation of virtual teams become the norm in organizations. “How do you bridge inclusion in a technology-driven environment, where co-workers are texting as a primary source of communication? What will inclusion look like behaviorally to the next generation of employees?” said Laura Brock, corporate manager of diversity and inclusion at Hormel Foods Corp.

The Role

Just 20 years ago, the CDO title was nonexistent. Since the position appeared, the role has evolved, taking on initiatives that claim impact on the financial success of many organizations.

The past: The CDO role’s history is brief, and there are still CDOs forging new ground. Deb Dagit, former chief diversity officer at Merck and now president of consulting company Deb Dagit Diversity, said in many instances CDOs have moved away from the C-suite and into other integrated areas of the business. She said this is a “troubling trend.” Some CDOs remain in the C-suite, however, while others hold the title without actually being part of the top executive team, maintaining a dotted-line relationship.

“If the CDO can’t look out and see the entire enterprise and impact it, they are not at the right level,” CVS’ Casey said.

The future: The future looks promising, however. Thanks in large part to globalization, CDOs need to play a critical role in the business. “The CDO position will be on solid ground as long as they can deliver the goods and put the company on a positive, profitable path,” Valle-Yañez said.

Further, Cobbs said the work itself will always be necessary because people are the differentiators, not technology or resources. “You have to leverage your people to your company’s competitive advantage.”

The Person

Individual experiences — such as those within generational contexts — will continue to shape the CDO role.

The past: “Most CDOs have their anchors to this work tied to race, gender and civil rights,” Cobbs said. In other words, CDOs bring personal passion and commitment to the work and the role. Primary dimensions such as race and gender have played an important part in CDOs’ work and identity.

However, younger generations, such as millennials, have grown up in a different environment. They have had more global exposure and are more comfortable with differences in race, gender and sexuality. They have experienced access to work and opportunities more easily. Thus, their issues in terms of diversity and inclusion are different than their predecessors. For instance, rather than a focus on race or gender in some cases, cross-generational challenges are more at the forefront for younger workers. Workplace flexibility and work-life balance is also of major concern.

The future: Valle-Yañez said she believes the next generation of CDOs will be “extremely bold and creative and not limited by preconceived ideas or notions. They will be linked to decision-makers, and they will want to be front and center, get engaged and figure out what needs to be done.”

She said this next crop of diversity executives will need to be extremely fluid in their ability to build relationships, not just with traditional groups, but at every level and with any and every part of the business. “They will

create something new and interesting and collaborative ... because they won't have the African-American or female mindset. They will push the envelope."

"When you think about today's millennials," said Hormel Foods' Brock, "their life experiences are vastly different than traditionalists or even the baby boomers. They are very connected — or should I say always connected ... cultivating relationships in a more virtual fashion. I think that brings both opportunity and challenge."

Brock also said the younger generations reveal an openness, a more global world view that comes from connecting easily with individuals one has never met. That exposure does not equate to experience, but CDOs can learn from younger generations, sharing their knowledge, wisdom and insights in return. In this way the next generation will be prepared.

Eye on Tomorrow

Despite challenges, major corporations continue to be committed to global diversity strategy, in part because of the value CDOs bring to the business. That value is not only important now, but also like any business strategy, to ensure continued relevance, diversity and inclusion must be sustainable. Sustainability requires a succession plan.

The nature of the work requires the diversity leader to play a complicated, demanding and interesting role to address a variety of issues involving law, talent management and human behavior, government, communities, special interest groups, business strategy and performance.

Future CDOs can come from any part of the business. There isn't a one-path track. However, like any business leader, future diversity executives need to be identified, developed and equipped with the skills, competencies, experience and knowledge to be effective leaders.

To meet the challenges that come with leading diversity strategy today and tomorrow, creating value for the bottom line and ensuring a diverse workforce has the access and opportunities needed to succeed, CDOs need to speak the language of business and be seen as business leaders first and diversity leaders second. «

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