



Greg Cunningham, chief diversity officer at U.S. Bank, says his job is to represent those who feel voiceless. U.S. BANK

Corporate America embraces diversity officers

Hail to the Chiefs

Sheree R. Curry
Special to USA TODAY

Greg Cunningham, chief diversity officer at U.S. Bank, will always remember 1968. His father's butcher shop was looted and burned during riots that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. Later that year, his father died of a brain aneurysm at their Pittsburgh home. Cunningham was just 5 years old.

In the time between the fire and his death, Cunningham's father was denied a bank loan to rebuild his business — a not-uncommon fate for a Black man in the 1960s. A white man named Karl Lutz gave him the money to reopen.

Cunningham's mother, now 92, made sure her son and his siblings remembered the man's name and two lessons: "We should never judge people by their race" and "everyone needs an ally."

When U.S. Bank customers, particularly African Americans, report facing discrimination, Cunningham's reactions as a Black man and his experiences as a C-suite leader kick in. "I feel terrible," he says. "I feel even more compelled to come back and make things better."

Chief diversity officers like Cunningham tackle diversity deficits throughout their companies. They are allies. They spearhead initiatives that may run the gamut from pay equity and supplier rela-

tionships to marketing strategies and diversity benchmarks for recruitment, retention and promotion.

"I think what a chief diversity officer is today is probably very different than how most people see it and historically how people have seen it," says Cunningham, who also holds the title of senior executive vice president and reports directly to CEO Andrew Cecere. "My job is to represent those who historically have felt like they haven't had a voice and oftentimes don't get seen and they don't have equitable access to opportunity. I represent their voices at the most senior levels of the organization."

And Americans are seeking that rep-

"Society has asked corporate America to be more accountable in a way that never happened before, and I believe companies have risen to that call" by putting more resources behind their actions.

Amelia Williams Hardy
Best Buy, chief inclusion and diversity officer

resentation. Survey results from Just Capital, a firm that tracks racial equity at corporations, show that 92 percent of Americans believe it is important for companies to promote racial diversity and equity in the workplace, up from 79 percent in 2021; among Black Americans, the figure is 95 percent.

Facing such expectations, corporate America needs leaders accountable for implementing initiatives and tracking results. Positions in the U.S. dedicated to diversity, equity and inclusion, or DEI, have quadrupled in the past five years, according to a November 2022 report from the consulting firm McKinsey & Co. It found that the rate of new chief diversity officer hires in 2021 was nearly triple the rate 16 months previously, before the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer.

Floyd's death was the catalyst that propelled Amelia Williams Hardy to chief diversity officer at Best Buy, based in the Minneapolis area. An active member of resource groups for Black employees and women since arriving at the big electronics retailer in 2014 from various roles at 3M, Hardy says, "I never had a desire to do (DEI work) full time."

Then in summer 2020, Hardy says, Best Buy CEO Corie Barry came to her with a proposal for her to move into the DEI space because that's where she could make the most positive impact at the moment. "I think you can really help us to

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Amelia Williams Hardy, chief inclusion and diversity officer at electronics retailer Best Buy, speaks during an event for Diwali, the Indian festival of lights, in 2022. She went into DEI work at Best Buy after the murder of George Floyd in 2020. BEST BUY

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accelerate our commitment in this area,” Hardy recalls Barry saying.

“My perspective changed after that and living through that racial unrest in real time,” says Hardy, who has an MBA from Tulane University and a background in marketing and business management. “What better way to marry my purpose, my passion and my profession than moving into the DEI space?”

Hardy became vice president of inclusion and diversity strategic initiatives. Within two years, she was named chief diversity officer and senior vice president, following the promotion of Mark Irvin, who held the chief diversity officer position previously.

“Society has asked corporate America to be more accountable in a way that never happened before, and I believe compa-

nies have risen to that call” by putting more resources behind their actions, Hardy says. Because “when companies don’t do that, customers will call you out, or they’ll say they won’t shop with you. Employees will say, ‘I want to choose a different employer. You’re no longer a best place to work.’”

It’s true that companies are seeking equity at various touch points, but “you can’t move the needle until you understand where it’s moving from,” says Bob Lockett, chief diversity and talent officer at payroll and human resources services provider ADP. “You need to make sure you’re setting realistic goals within an appropriate time frame to achieve certain outcomes.”

ADP, which bills itself as the leader in human capital management, launched a tool in 2021 called the DEI Dashboard, which is available to its clients. The dash-

board is designed to help employers monitor and improve diversity in their workforce. “Where DEI efforts have failed in the past is when companies either don’t know the data or they’re trying to ‘boil the ocean,’ so to speak — they’re trying to attack all of the problems at once,” Lockett says.

Common corporate initiatives include unconscious bias training, which Lockett says helps employees “identify and understand any biases they might hold and consciously work to address them,” as well as employee resource groups “to make everyone feel welcome and included,” and increase talent retention.

U.S. Bank’s Cunningham says, “The fundamental around DEI is innovation — not just in the most obvious ways, as you are designing products and services that meet the needs of an ever more diverse community.”

Focused Initiatives

McKinsey reports that 53 percent of Fortune 500 companies now have a chief diversity officer or equivalent role. Executives from some top U.S. companies talk about their efforts.

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ADP

*Bob Lockett,
chief diversity and talent officer*



“Our Talent Task Force is specifically designed to create parity for Black and Latinx leaders relative to their representation in the workforce. Another

program is our Workforce Diversity Initiative, which is where we look at our workforce, particularly our sales and front-line efforts, and we ask ourselves: Are we reflective of the communities we’re serving? Examining different segments in this way, we’re able to understand our progress and any areas of opportunity.”

AT&T

*Michelle Jordan,
chief diversity officer*



“We’re committed to a diverse workforce and supporting people entering AT&T from all walks of life who aspire to greater possibilities. Since 2020, we’ve been

helping close the economic gap disproportionately impacting Black people without a four-year degree. We joined more than 30 companies in committing to OneTen, with the collective goal to hire 1 million Black Americans in family-sustaining jobs over the next 10 years. AT&T also collaborates with HBCUs to advance economic opportunity for young leaders. We launched a multiyear mentoring and workforce readiness initiative for HBCU students, along with committing to boost leadership development and recruit diverse talent.”

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Best Buy

Amelia Williams Hardy,
chief inclusion and diversity officer



“In December 2020, we publicly announced our call to do better. We said that we were really going to focus on our retention rate, so that our BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and people of color) employees would be at parity to our general population, and that we would transform our senior leadership ranks to more reflect that diversity — and our board of directors has been diverse from a gender and racial and ethnic standpoint. By going public with those commitments, it has elevated our accountability.

“We are on our fifth Racial Equity Leadership Immersion (program). Over 80 leaders have gone through immersive cultural education on race, equity and disparities and how systems have perpetuated themselves over time and how we can do better.”

Liberty Mutual

Dawn Frazier-Bohnert,
executive vice president and global diversity, equity & inclusion officer



“In 2020, we launched Eight Weeks of Action to Disrupt Racial Bias, an initiative aimed at providing employees with resources, virtual sessions and a discussion guide to help increase understanding across race and ethnicity. To truly support a diverse workforce, you need diversity, equity and inclusion all working in tandem. You can bring together a high-performing, diverse team, but without giving all employees a sense of belonging and valuing their unique contributions, you’re not fully leveraging those diverse perspectives and talents.”

McDonald’s

Reginald J. Miller,
vice president and global chief diversity, equity and inclusion officer

“McDonald’s is on a multiyear DEI journey to leverage our global scale to dismantle barriers and create economic opportunities across every part of the business — consumers, employees, sup-



McDonald’s is committed to dedicating more of its marketing budget to working with diverse-owned partners. MCDONALD’S

pliers, franchisees and beyond. We’ve set ambitious goals, and we’re proud of the progress we’ve made to date. But there is more work to be done as we continue working towards our global DEI ambition.”



Specific examples of DEI programs highlighted by the restaurant chain include: increasing the share of marketing spending in the U.S. with diverse-owned partners to 15 percent by the end of 2024; spending more than \$4 billion — 25 percent of McDonald’s annual U.S. systemwide spending — with diverse-owned suppliers as of the end of 2021; achieving equal pay for equal work by gender and for historically underrepresented groups across company-owned restaurants and corporate employees globally; and investing \$250 million over five years in the United States in a franchisee recruitment initiative that will increase the number of McDonald’s franchisees from historically underrepresented groups and other backgrounds.

Target

Kiera Fernandez,
chief diversity & inclusion officer
and senior vice president for HR



Target increased the amount of money it spent with Black-owned companies and suppliers and doubled the number of Black-owned brands on its shelves. It also launched Target Forward Founders, an accelerator program to help Black-owned and diverse businesses in their early stages increase their potential. The company established its Racial Equity Action and Change (REACH) program with a goal of spending more than \$2 billion with Black-owned businesses by 2025.

For example, “We announced a partnership with Bridgeforth Farms, a fifth-generation Black-owned family farm, to source sustainably grown cotton for our products, starting with select tees with-in the 2022 Black History Month collection.”

U.S. Bank

Greg Cunningham,
senior executive vice president
and chief diversity officer



“The biggest thing for us was the launch of our Access Commitment, which is our long-term pledge to close racial wealth disparities. With our Access Home program, we have initiatives to help close homeownership disparities and create greater access to financial education. Our Access Business initiative is a way to (help) small businesses not only get capital or loans but to demystify having a relationship with the bank. Our Access Wealth initiative is the outgrowth of research we did with Black customers to better understand their financial advisory needs. We’ve been training a number of our business bankers to become future financial advisers to better meet those needs.”

—Sheree R. Curry