

## Bringing DEI Strategies to the Forefront

by Kathleen Hoffelder, NJCPA Senior Content Editor – February 14, 2022



Gone are the days when it ticked the diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) box to simply hire one racially mixed person in a CPA firm or a company's finance department and call it a day. For an organization to truly value what DEI can bring to the table, it needs to have the right culture, employee resources and search mechanisms in place at all staffing levels.

Policies championed by top leaders in an organization can be helpful as a means of enacting changes that can lead to DEI, but the real work is in

ensuring that the day-to-day experiences of all people reflect a true sense of belonging, according to Laura Crowley, CPA, MBA, CPA leader in assurance services and global co-lead for Citrin Cooperman Empowering Diversity and Gender Equality. "Top leaders set the tone and strategic vision of a firm, and their commitment to a culture of equality is crucial to the success of any initiative," she said. But truly listening, understanding and appreciating the unique contributions of each individual "can only be done at the grassroots level by managers who interact closely with individuals and teams."

While that may mean an organization has to put in some work to implement a thorough DEI plan, the end result is worth it. "When people join an organization, they want to see that there are others who look like them working there. The best way to attract and retain talent is to do the hard work to create a culture where each person's ideas are heard and contributions are valued," said Crowley. "There is no quick fix. Prospective employees will see through attempts to promote DEI programs that are really just window dressing."

And having a hands-on approach is key. "Currently, we are conducting focus groups that intentionally target all levels, departments and geographies to ensure that we get the most complete picture of our DEI successes and challenges," she explained.

Elena Richards, chief diversity and inclusion officer at KPMG, understands the need to reach out to all staff levels when incorporating DEI strategies at an organization.  [Chat with us](#)  host an ongoing #DEI Speakers Series where we invite scholars, industry experts, and business leaders.





thought leaders to share their expertise on diversity related topics.” The series is open to all employees across the firm.

One recent discussion, she added, focused on how “isms” can impact workplace culture, with a focus on certain ones in particular, like #ableism, #ageism and racial microaggressions. Guest speakers shared their personal and professional insights on the impact of isms and approaches to manage and mitigate their biases.

## Inclusive Advantages

Those DEI hires often don't disappoint. “More likely than not, they are hard workers,” said John M. Lisa, CPA, MBA, founder and managing partner of John M. Lisa CPA, and a past NJCPA Bergen Chapter president. Typically, he has hired immigrants, those still needing to take some portion of the CPA Exam or those who did not yet fulfill the work requirements to become a CPA. “They didn't come from money. There weren't born with a silver spoon in their mouth and had to work for everything,” he said, noting that a couple of people he hired also had another job at local supermarkets in addition to working for him.

“Being exclusionary to certain people is not a good thing. Years ago, accounting was a very white, Anglo-Saxon profession and it's changed. It's changed tremendously,” he added. “The kids today going into accounting don't look like the kids I went to college with.” Though there is a disconnect in why those students may not be taking the CPA Exam or advancing towards accounting careers, John Lisa explained that it could be due to the high expense of obtaining a CPA license. Obtaining a CPA license in New Jersey requires passing the CPA Exam within the time requirements and 150 semester hours from an accredited school in addition to one year of experience working under a CPA whose active license is from New Jersey or a state equivalent to New Jersey.

Sole practitioners, like John Lisa, and small CPA firms have known for years that some of their best hires were from immigrant/minority families. “When our office was in Palisades Park, we hired a young lady who was an immigrant from South Korea. She is now a tax manager/principal with PwC. Another young lady was an immigrant from Kuwait and now has an executive position with Nike,” he added.

## Sourcing Talent

At the sole practitioner level, resources are a bit limited in attracting a large amount of talent so the hiring process can be challenging. John Lisa noted, “You have to keep your eyes and ears open for talent. A true entrepreneur hires the best person for the job. A true capitalist hires the person who is going to move the business forward.”

Larger CPA firms are also recognizing the benefits of hiring diverse staff. Deloitte took a broad approach to DEI challenges in the accounting profession last June when it established a \$75 million Making Accounting Diverse and Equitable (MADE) commitment to work towards long-term DEI change. The commitment includes the Deloitte Foundation Accounting Scholars Program, a MADE working group, a fellowship program with academia and paid CPA Exam readiness classes.





According to KPMG's Richardson, her firm actively recruits from Hispanic- and Native American-serving institutions and historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and has more than tripled its outreach and commitments. "This year alone we increased our hiring from HBCUs by over 40 percent," she said. "In an effort to deepen our relationship with these institutions, we also added new HBCUs to KPMG's Master of Accounting with Data and Analytics (MADA) program, an effort that aims to close the gap between academic preparation and accounting career readiness."

In other efforts, through KPMG's Rise and Embark programs, the number of interns grew by 15 percent, and the acceptance rate expanded by a similar percentage (68 to 83 percent). And those efforts have been noticed. A KPMG 2021 U.S. DEI Transparency Report noted that there was a marked increase across the firm in the level of discussion around the importance of DEI in key business imperatives, such as talent attraction, talent and learning development, total rewards, and succession planning, compared to previous years.

Finding the right talent at many CPA advisories and corporations has been challenging since the COVID-19 pandemic but it helps to appeal to as many, and as wide a candidate pool, as possible. "The talent shortage has hit the professional services industry very hard, and certainly having a robust DEI-focused culture can help companies attract and retain talent," said Crowley.



**Elena Richards**




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**John M. Lisa**

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**Laura M. Crowley**   

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